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nairobi's urban perspective

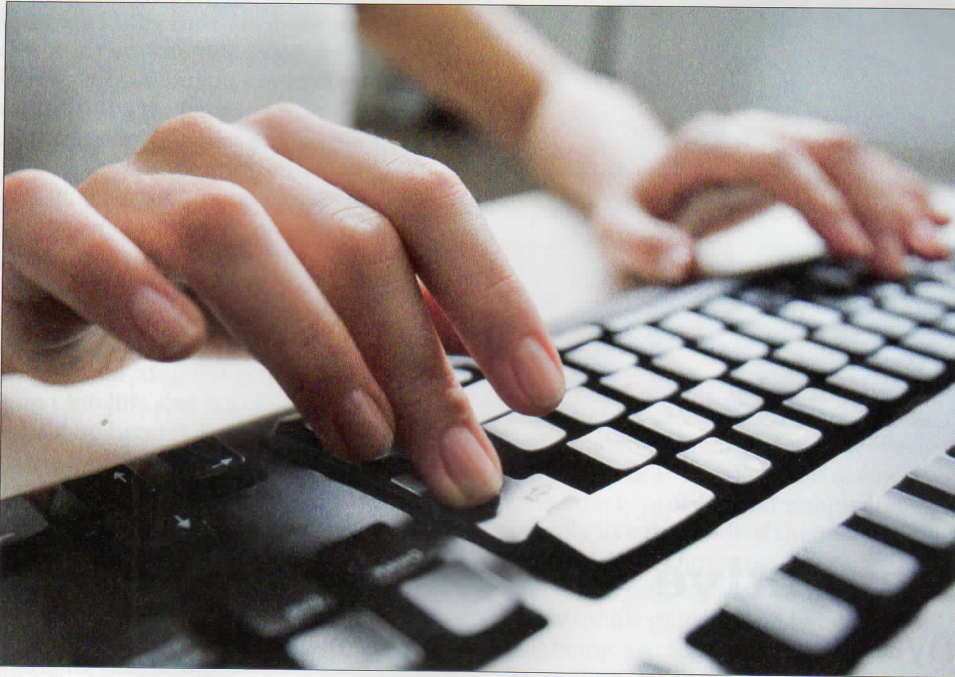
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Click, Like, Share: Changing the world one tweet at a time!



By Zawadi Birya

At 1pm East African time on February 28th 2012, Kenyans across the world stopped what they were doing, stood at attention, eyes fixed on the future and belted out the national anthem in its entirety. For months they had heard the message, they understood what it meant and when the time came, they heeded the call and took action: *1 pm, 1 people, 1 nation, 1 anthem*.

Some sang to express their patriotism, while others sang in support of “unity, peace and liberty”, but the fact remains, they sang. What was unique about the singing is that it took place as a result of online activism - a consistent concerted online campaign dubbed the *February 28th Campaign*.

The Campaign was supposed to unite Kenyans and ignite a sense of kinship in them - even if just for a few minutes and from the buzz generated on social media platforms that day- it worked!

Nekesa Were, Operations Director, IHub technology hub says that, the February 28th campaign is a prime example of how influential online activists are becoming in Kenya. She says the success of the campaign demonstrated the power of online activism and solidified it as a tool for change in the country.

He believes that “what makes

online activism and campaigning effective is its ability to mobilize and organize people. It takes causes, articulates them and lays out all the information necessary for people to understand and get firmly behind them.”

Something, Kiti Chigiri, an independent software developer in Nairobi agrees with. He says, “Campaigns like Kony 2012 have proven that online activism works.” He insists that, “With the Kony 2012 campaign, the aim was simple - the video was supposed to achieve 4 things: Highlight the evils of Kony and the LRA in Northern Uganda, Increase civilian protection in the region, pressure International governments to assist in the region and to capture Kony. The first 3 goals have been achieved - all thanks to a short video that went viral and 3.7 million support pledges.”

In the recent past, in Kenya, online activism has been used to draw attention to the excesses of legislators, dangerous driving and tribalism. However even as it grows in popularity, experts warn that it has its limitations. Karungari Thuo, an Associate Lecturer at the Kiriri Women's University says, “The problem with online activism is that it only affects the cross-section of society that use the Internet as a prime tool of communication. Mama Mbogas didn't take part in the February 28th Campaign,

not because they're not patriots but because they didn't know about it, so it shuts out a lot of people.”

Still, another shortcoming of online activism is that it can only bring about change as part of a wider strategy. Kiti Chigiri says, “The success of online activism and the reason why certain online campaigns flourish and others fail is that it depends on whether news networks and social influencers pick it up and endorse it. It can't really stand on its own yet.”

While many are optimistic about its growth others are skeptical about it. Jimmy Gitonga, Community Lead at IHub Nairobi, believes online activism is a waste of time and has no “real world relevance”.

He says that the problem with online activism in Kenya is that it's reactivist and removed from the real world, “Online activists in Kenya are not thought leaders, they simply react to what is going on and whip up emotions, then move on to the next cause and the next. They never see anything through to the end and that way they never bring about any real change.”

He suggests that many online activists are posers, “Many people operating as activists online are only out to get ahead and pose as activists in order to create brands, get attention and make money. This is the sad reality.”

So the question begs, is online activism in Kenya bringing about change? Are online activists the new street activists minus the dreadlocks and African prints?

Karungari Thuo says, “probably not”. She says that real change cannot be brought about by armchair activism, “The only thing online activism does is raise awareness on issues but it doesn't bring about real change, at least not in the Kenyan context.”

She insists that because of Kenya's technology position and the fact that most people still don't have access to the internet, it's difficult for online activism to have any real effect on the status quo, “Real change can't come from someone sitting in the comfort of their home, it can only come from organizing communities, equipping them with information and empowering them but seldom does online activism translate into action in the real world.”

While online activism hasn't brought about large scale measurable change in Kenya, perhaps the fact that it can make thousands of Kenyans stand up on the same day at the same time and sing the same tune is telling. Perhaps it is the future of activism.