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Mediating the nation-building agenda in public service broadcasting: convergence active user-generated content (AUGC) for television in Kenya

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Abstract

The violence, destruction and death of more than 1 200 people resulting from the highly disputed 2007 election results in Kenya was a considerable watershed moment. It exposed the deep fragmentation within the nation-state and became a significant fissure for the simmering tensions among the 42 "tribes" of Kenya. In the media-scape, these events evinced the elitist and tribal hegemony in media ownership and revealed, more than ever before, that certain voices and narratives were privileged over others. These events also unmasked recurrent motifs, which illuminated the stranglehold that the political, media and economic elites wielded over media instruments and platforms, for their own benefit.

This study aims to explore the extent to which active user-generated content in the digital media space can intervene in, and disrupt, some of these exclusionary practices in the public service mediascape, to potentially inspire a re-imagination in this space for nation building in Kenya. It is premised on a participatory action research approach that draws on theoretical discourse on nationalism and nation building, as this is the field from which the study's key problems stem and where conceptual discourses on digital media converge. The study also draws on participatory discourses in the media, as these potentially present an emancipatory platform for those on the margins of the hegemonic centres. Here it mainly draws on Bhabha's cultural difference theory, Billig's banal nationalisms, Jenkins' ideas on convergence culture, Carpentier's thoughts on maximalist media participation and Thumim's assertions on self-representation in the digital space.

The study also hinges on the practice-informed pilot project titled *Utaifa Mashinani Masimulizi ya Ukenya* (*UMMU*) digital narratives, co-created by the researcher together with the Abakuria (the Kuria people) of Kenya. This is a community marginally represented in the public service broadcasting-scape in Kenya and a people whose narrative discourse is seldom present in the public sphere.

The study argues that broadcast content – not just in Kenya but also in Africa – on User Generated Content (UGC) for broadcasting predominantly focuses on passive forms of UGC rather than Active User Generated Content (AUGC) - a term coined in this study to refer to user-generated content that entails a more meaningful, emancipatory and empowering form of participation amongst those traditionally referred to as consumers of broadcast content. It contends that although many contemporary television broadcasters around the world continue to create a perception of increasing and robust audience participation in televised content, in Kenya this is certainly not the case. It argues that significant forms of current participation on television are illusionary, minimalist and futile, as they largely entrench television's balance of power among the media elites. Ordinary people are often 'invited' to participate in broadcasting, but their entry point into these narratives tends to be limited to accessing already-completed narratives and engaging in what constitutes token participation, with minimal, and in most cases, no impact on the story, its conception, distribution and socio-economic benefits.

Drawing on insights from the *UMMU* project, the study proposes that AUGC can potentially disrupt some of the existing tropes and motifs in the Public Service Mediascape opening up spaces for multiple and diverse voices and narratives in Kenya. This potentially enables active participation from constituencies that have traditionally been on the margins of the Kenyan nation-state to partake in the nation building process.