The Responsibility of Working with Communities

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📅 PUBLISHED 25 APR 2013

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By: James Ndiga An iHub Research and Ushahidi project, Umati (Swahili for "crowd"), has been monitoring online dangerous speech since September 2012. The *Umati* (Swahili word for "crowd") project was set with an aim of identifying and monitoring hate/dangerous speech from the Kenyan online space and forwarding incidences of dangerous speech to the Uchaguzi platform,

governmental ways to reduce dangerous speech. In the weeks leading up to the Kenyan election on March 4th, NipeUkweli worked to educate citizens both online and offline about:

- Different categories of hate speech;
- How to identify dangerous hate speech;
- Frameworks of dangerous speech;
- Contents of dangerous speech;
- Ways of combating dangerous speech;
- How to report such incidence of dangerous speech through Uchaguzi.

With little time remaining to the elections, *NipeUkweli* had to devise a quick and effective means of disseminating useful information about Dangerous Speech and ensuring that the target audiences (communities potentially more "vulnerable" to incitement) were reached. We therefore embarked on having community forums and using community radio stations, e.g. Koch FM based in Korogocho, and Safari Africa Radio, to reach out to grass-roots communities in urban Nairobi slum areas. We also identified violence-prone areas, namely Mathare, Kariobangi, Kamukunji, and Dandora, where we also held various forums. These were some of the sites worst hit by post-election violence in 2007-2008. It was interesting relating with the people in these areas--from church leaders and the elderly, to hostile youths. All seem to have politically matured since 2007 and were talking of peace, love and unity. This was evident in the way the community members recited community pledges together, singing the national anthem and reciting the Lord's Prayer. After the completion of the Elections, we decided to conduct feedback forums to understand the community's experiences during elections and on their use of the Uchaguzi platform. "Mwalimu James Umerudi! Karibu sana (Teacher James, You've come back! Welcome!)." The feedback forums revealed that citizens were glad that the Uchaguzi technology system and *NipeUkweli* had not failed them. We heard positive feedback that most of their complaints sent through the system were addressed and dealt with. We heard many praises and then an old man (mzee) stood and said "Tumewasifa sana na tuko na imani na nyinyi, kama mliweza kujumuisha haya mashirika yote yafanye kazi na nyinyi wakati wa Uchaguzi mbona msiyashughulikie mawaswala ya security, gender violence, rape, burglary na mengineo ambayo yatatusumbua kwa miaka ingine tano ama mtangoja hadi 2018 wakati wa Uchaguzi mje tena. (We have all praises for you and we are hopeful, we are glad you managed to partner with all these big organization to successfully monitor elections, why don't you now work on resolving day-to-day issues in the slums that include: rape, gender violence, burglary, child abuse among others. Or will you wait until 2018 when we are expected to have our next general election and come talk about Uchaguzi and NipeUkweli platforms again?)." This blunt question revealed the desire and need for longer-term systems to be in place. Instead of only focusing on election-related violence, we learned through the feedback forums that communities want to use similar technology-based systems to deal with other issues, especially around general security in the slum areas. This was great proof of concept for a technology-based system to address the issues faced in Kenyan communities. But the question that naturally follows is about the mandate of technology organizations and ourcompetenceand capacity for addressing community needs and demands. As much as we empathize with what the citizens need, it cannot be our job, for example, as a Dangerous Speech research project to create a tech system for acting on community reports on their daily security

talking about SMS services, based on our small interaction with the community around this NipeUkweli project, this definitely rings true. Luckily, through frank discussions with the community we made sure that they realized that their asks were beyond our abilities as a research initiative. We did promise to share their stories and desires with relevant other organizations and we have been doing so with human rights organizations. We hope that perhaps this might eventually help these communities to be heard and assisted. Through this experience, we were reminded that it is important for technology and even research companies to rememberto manage expectations and not over-promisewhen interacting with users and research participants. Otherwise, your reputation and the credibility of your services/products will be diminished. Make sure you have frank and open communications with the communities you engage so that everyone is on the same page about the scope of interaction. If you over-promise and don't deliver, you will be making it harder not only for yourselves, but also for organizations who will want to work with these communities in the future.

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