DEVPOLICYBLOG

Can social media transform Papua New Guinea? Reflections and questions

By Nayahamui Michelle Rooney
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As of July 2012 there just over 100,000 registered facebook users in Papua New Guinea (PNG), most of whom are below the age of 35, and an increasing array of PNG related websites. The explosion in the use of social media by Papua New Guineans is changing the way that they are engaging in politics, business and social activities on the home front. It is also changing the way that the international community is engaging with Papua New Guinea (PNG). In an unprecedented style, resonant with tours made by highly public figures and dignitaries, a young PNG man (Martyn Namorong, prolific blogger, self described betel nut seller and grassroots person) undertook a privately sponsored two week visit to the Australian cities of Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra in 2012. This visit entailed an advance announcement and a highly publicised agenda and programme wherein he met with prominent Australian PNG experts, politicians, journalists, ordinary Australian residents and gave seminars to a variety of Australian audiences.

A number of recent articles and radio interviews (Radio Australia, ABC, 4 July 2012; Radio Australia, ABC, 5th July 2012; Rausim! Social media and political protest in Papua New Guinea; Catherine Graue of Australia Network) with pioneering social media practitioners reveals some important features of the emergence of social media in PNG. These people include Emmanuel Narakobi (administrator of the Masalai Blog and the facebook forum Sharp talk); Tavurvur who administers the Garamut blog); Martyn Namorong, Alexander

Rheeney , (PNG journalist and administrator of PNG Perspective); and Nou Vada (law student, blogger and administrator of The Edebamona Blog). In recognition of this emerging form of media Malum Nalu (Journalist and administrator of the Malum Nalu blogspot) was awarded the UNESCO/Divine Word Institute Award for Communication and Development in 2011.

In her paper, Rausim! Social media and political protest in Papua New Guinea, Sarah Logan talks about the use of social media in the recent political gymnastics in PNG. Inter alia, she highlights two roles of social media. The first is the role of social media in facilitating political protest and the second is its facilitation of civil society engagement in the practice of politics. She also highlights that the limitations on the use of social media include the limited numbers of users and the general sense of "political apathy" and "fragmented political identity" associated with PNG politics (Sarah Logan).

Martyn Namorong and Alexander Rheeney highlight (ABC Radio Australia) how PNG society is very community based and many educated and urban based Papua New Guineans remain closely connected with their rural based families. They point out that this means that the current numbers of facebook users represents a significant mass of PNG society whose engagement through social media has the potential of being translated and amplified through various offline networks. The far wider coverage of basic mobile phone services (phone calls and text messages) adds to this amplification effect.

Much of the discussion is focussed on how social media is revolutionising the way in which Papua New Guineans are engaging in the political arena. For example, Narakobi highlights that during the Easter 2012 political protests membership of the sharp talk facebook forum jumped from between 3000 and 4000 to over 6000.

Yet, other questions emerge beyond the potential role of social media in political transformation. Core to these is: How do social, development and political actors (national and international) translate this social revolution into something that matters for those that need it most? In this regard, two questions emerge:

1. How can society manage the institutions that are created to ensure the principles of democracy – accountability, transparency, fairness, justice and equality – function to protect society as it shifts and responds to new and emerging power actors that are in a position at this point in history to harness the power of social media for a specific agenda?
2. How can the power of social media facilitate a better engagement between, not only civil society and political actors, but also between civil society and

development actors to bring about tangible development outcomes?

Both these questions are particularly important within the PNG context where lack of political will, corruption and lack of implementation capacity are the main impediments to development; violence is an explicit and blatant form of power; literacy rates are below 50%; over 30% of the population live below the poverty line; there are over 700 languages; and systems of law and order and law enforcement are dysfunctional at best. They are also important for development policy where an environment of functioning democracy, political stability and protection of society is the foundation for the achievement of development outcomes.

The following paragraphs are intended to highlight just some of the dynamics emerging in the social media sphere in PNG.

That the above referred social media pioneers have chosen different forms of public representation – real name versus pseudonym – is revealing of the social and political dynamics underpinning the use of social media in PNG. Namorong says that using his real name adds credibility and accountability to his writing. Another advantage is the direct credit that one receives for their contribution via social media. One disadvantage is the security of a person who speaks out on a sensitive issue such as corruption. On the other hand, Tavurur has blogged very successfully (high quality, high number of followers and sustained over a number of years) for several years now. In other cases, such as a facebook forum, the use of a pseudonym poses questions of transparency and accountability on the part of a forum administrator.

In a country where names are often synonymous with ethnicity, family and sometimes political affiliation and in a context where corruption and violence are widespread, it is understandable that some may wish to conceal their real identities when engaging in the public sphere. It is also interesting to see that many people use their real identities and openly write about issues such as corruption and violence. In one example, a woman in a forum of over 1000 people wrote how she did not support a relative who was a candidate in the election. She acknowledged that she might get in trouble with the family for speaking out but felt that she needed to have her say. In another example, in the PNGians against domestic violence forum, which has over 6000 members, women publicly plead for help to deal with violent situations. These examples reveal a civil society that is actively engaging on matters that affect their lives and that social media presents an accessible avenue to do so. Whether it is a safe and free median to engage is yet to be seen.

The table below provides a snapshot of some of the forum profiles and membership figures

and reveals a variety of styles. Closed versus open groups; known administrators versus unknown administrators; provincial focus versus national or issue based focus. Membership of groups ranges from anywhere below 100 to over 6000.

National/Provincial focus	Name of group	Description of group	No. of members
Snapshot of some facebook forums in Papua New Guinea (as at July 2012)			
Central	Central Province Papua New Guinea	Open group, includes election updates	646
Jiwaka	Jiwaka Elites Forum (JEF)	Closed group with known administrator	105
	Jiwaka Province	Open group	503
Gulf	Kerema, Gulf Province	Closed group	342
Manus	Head Toktok	Open group	1872
	Admiralty Islands Forum	Open group	1017
Oro Province	Better Oro province beyond 2017	Closed group, known administrator	479
Enga	2012 General Election updates 4 Enga Province	Closed group. Known administrator	74
PNG	Papua New Guineans against domestic violence	Open group	6269
PNG	The National Research Institute	Closed group	144
PNG	Institute of National Affairs	Organisation page. No members	
PNG	University of Papua New Guinea	Open group	1178
	PNG University of Technology	Open group	221

PNG	Sharp talk	Open group with known administrator (from around between 3-4000 it jumped to over 6000 during the constitutional crisis	6600
PNG	PNG Elections 2012 Forum	Open group, known administrator	348
PNG	PNG Women in the 2012 National elections	Open groupAdministrator not listed	82
PNG	Against PNG Policy Brutality	Close groupKnown administrator – profile image is a photo of a man brandishing a gun	516

I conclude by raising some issues for consideration in the hope of stimulating further dialogue.

- How does PNG society ensure that this shift in power and voice towards those who master the art of social media is made in a way that new power actors are equally held accountable for what they say and do with their skill in an evolving social context?
- How does society protect the rights and security of those who wish to speak up on corruption and violence?
- How does society respond to social demands created by the opportunities opened by social media? For example the voices of women who publically seek help in violent situations invoke a joint social responsibility for immediate support but they also create opportunities for those in the policy and development arena to formulate appropriate responses.
- Are issues on cyber education and safety, including the protection of children, being integrated into the formal and informal education system? Is funding being made available for organisations to run training courses on cyber safety in all communities?
- In terms of public and private partnership, might we see a proliferation of bill boards, TV advertisements, mobile phone alerts akin to donor supported HIV/AIDS and other billboards promoting the safe and responsible use of social media?
- Has the PNG Ombudsman Commission created an avenue to enable engagement with civil society through social media?

- Has the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary created an avenue to enable engagement with civil society through social media?
- Is there an Electoral Commission facilitated forum to enable feedback and election observation through social media?
- Some development agencies, including donors, multilateral agencies, international financial institutions and NGOs are already engaging with civil society through social media in some of the countries they work in. Is it time for development partners and donors in PNG to embrace this social revolution in the same way?
- Are those tasked with development policy formulation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation, actively exploring ways of tapping into the opportunities presented by social media to engage with civil society?
- Is it possible that in the near future PNG will have an online and social media facilitated "development partner" and "civil society" forum?

Whatever the answer to these questions, it is clear that there are huge implications for the practice of development in PNG. If social media is to make a difference in PNG beyond its ability to reshape the political arena, it must be utilised as a tool by all actors interested in the development of PNG to translate this new energy into tangible development outcomes.

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