

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## 'Chieftaincy' in the Social Media Space: Community Policing in a Twitter Convened *Baraza*

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Lanet Umoja is on the outskirts of Nakuru town in the Central Rift region, one of the most politically volatile regions in Kenya. Its area chief, Francis Kariuki, has been the focus of local and international media attention for his use of Twitter in transforming the interaction between members of his locale and himself. The focus of this attention has largely been trained on his deployment of the micro blogging platform Twitter for community policing. Using Manuel Castell's idea of the network society and John Postill's concept of how agencies and agents engage a society that is networked, this paper argues that social media has expanded both the spatial and temporal aspects of the *baraza*, thus producing a very effective site for not only community policing, but also novel experimentation by the chief at the local level.

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### Introduction

The exponential growth of social media use in Africa is apparent. The rapid rise in the use of mobile telephones and internet-enabled gadgets has resulted in social media becoming an important locus of social and political transformation in Africa. This paper discusses how a local chief in Kenya began using micro-blogging site Twitter to radically transform the historical deliberative space known as *baraza* into a space for peace building and community policing.

Shortly after Kenya's post-election violence in 2008, forty eight year old Francis Kariuki quit his position as a primary school head teacher to take up a job in the provincial administration as a chief. In his words, the sudden shift from working with young

minds in the protective confines of a school to being in charge of an expansive administrative location was a switch from relative predictability to uncertainty.<sup>1</sup> As chief he was in charge of Lanet Umoja, a semi-urban location in Nakuru County in Rift Valley province which is about 200 kilometres from the city of Nairobi. Lanet Umoja is largely cosmopolitan, relatively poor and has a population of about 30,000 residents. After being introduced to Twitter by one of his youthful residents in 2011, Chief Kariuki became the focus of both local and international media attention when he began using Twitter to complement his administrative duties. At the time of writing this paper he had posted over 3,400 tweets from his account and had over 37,000 'followers.' While his use of Twitter in this way has been heralded by media as revolutionary, less attention has been given to how Chief Kariuki's

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use of Twitter constitutes an extension, or refashioned form of the *baraza*.<sup>2</sup> *Baraza* is a Swahili word that describes the semi-formal and mostly regular public (open air) meetings convened by a local chief for purposes of addressing local issues and facilitating the percolation of state agenda and policy to the grassroots.

The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate how social media is used in the everyday lives of people in Lanet Umoja, and how they, in a subtle yet effective way, can help to build a more cohesive society at a very local level. This paper seeks to deliberately avoid exaggeration of the impact of social media on peacebuilding in Africa. It intends to show how a local actor (the chief), can use social media, with varying degrees of success, to fight crime, responds to emergencies, and heal. As several other scholars have argued, there is a need to be cautious in making broad claims about the impact of social media and ICTs in Africa and to consider whether they are simply refashioning existing communication structures (Nyabuga 2009; Asiedu 2012; Berger 2012; Mudhai and Facson 2009). Therefore, this research takes note of three broad categories: 1) the need to focus on the main actor (the chief), 2) the medium (Twitter, Mobile Telephony) and 3) the audience (residents of Lanet Umoja). Using Castell's idea of the network and Postill's concept of actors/agents in a community perceived to be networked, the paper attempts to show how Twitter in Lanet Umoja produces a versatile 'communication fabric.'

## Methodology

To accomplish the stated aims, the study used mostly interviews and focus group discussions, as well as observation. A total of 70 structured and unstructured interviews were done with residents of Lanet Umoja (Lanet Umoja has two sub-locations, Muronyo and Umoja 2, both of which are administered by assistant chiefs who report to Chief Kariuki). Among these were six purposive sampled individuals thought to be either key in

actualising Twitter use in the area, or opinion formers in Lanet Umoja. These included several interviews with Chief Kariuki himself, his two assistant chiefs who routinely deputise him, a number of village headmen, opinion leaders from the church, school administration (head teachers and teachers) a chief from a neighbouring location (this was done to gain comparative insights) and a youth leader who many in Lanet Umoja claim was the brains behind Twitter use in Lanet Umoja. Since one of the main concerns was with depth of opinion regarding use and perceptions of Twitter in community policing, the study used six focus group discussions with each group made up of a diverse range of 20 to 30 individuals (male, female, employed, unemployed, youth and professionals (mostly primary school teachers) were all represented). While organised settings such as schools provided a predictable structure for selecting participants for the focus groups, for the four the focus groups done around the shopping centre this was not the case. Here, the researcher took advantage of the unique dynamics of most shopping centres in peri-urban settings in Africa. At shopping centres groups often sit together waiting to be hired for odd jobs, or simply passing idle time. The researcher approached such already formed groups and asked their permission to discuss their perceptions of local Twitter use. In all instances, the groups were enthusiastic to be engaged in what they felt was a worthy deliberative exercise. In the groups, the researcher sought to find out their perceptions of Twitter within their location, how they interact with it, and the extent to which it has had a direct or indirect impact in their everyday lives. The researcher had four phone interviews with Chief Kariuki prior to the actual fieldwork and four one on one interviews with him in Nakuru and Eldoret. The entire field research was carried out between May and August 2014. In addition, Chief Kariuki's tweets were analysed based on the text/content between early 2011 and late 2013.

### Network, social media and the refashioning of the *Baraza*

In an interview with the author,<sup>3</sup> Chief Kariuki revealed how he fortuitously got into Twitter and how he embarked on building this digital public space. All Kenyan chiefs are required by law to convene at least two *barazas* in a month. His initial motivation of subscribing to Twitter was to enable him to send notifications about upcoming *barazas* to all of the expansive Lanet Umoja location without the inconvenience and expense of pinning up public notices. In present day Kenya *barazas* are perceived as gatherings that are a needless waste of time and better left to idle, aging men and women. Younger faces would occasionally attend *barazas* during the odd instances when the government recruits unskilled labour through chiefs. Knowing this, Kariuki began building his Twitter audience with the handful of *baraza* attendees who would occasionally peak at 150 people. At each meeting, he would explain the importance of real time, direct access to the chief, and the need for obtaining a Twitter account to be able to 'follow' him. While he succeeded in getting a few to subscribe to the micro-blogging site, the lack of internet enabled smart phones and the obvious difficulty of navigating into the social media for first time internet users proved a huge obstacle.

Chief Kariuki realised that while social media and internet use was an obstacle, almost everyone had access to a mobile phone. He negotiated with mobile network provider Safaricom, who agreed to link his Twitter account to a unique four digit number which allowed his tweets to bounce off this number and instantly appear as a short message (SMS) to anyone linked to the four digit number (8988). Subscription to the four digit number proved very easy and practical since villagers would only be required to send a special message to the service provider by quoting this number and from then on would receive Chief Kariuki's tweets in the form of an SMS. Although using a third

party platform, the service is entirely free. The public in the peri-urban Lanet Umoja did not need internet connection to access his tweets for free.

A significant but comparatively smaller number of the residents interviewed in this study (about 40 per cent), most of whom had received above high school education and were small business owners, owned internet enabled smartphones and had an account on Twitter. A larger majority of the respondents who were farmers, casual labourers, and jobless youth used normal mobile phones that had no capacity to connect to the internet. Therefore, they mostly received the tweets as texts through the Safaricom Platform 8988. It follows then that Chief Kariuki's over 37,000 followers on twitter only form a small fraction of his entire audience. Furthermore, his full reach is likely even larger considering that mobile phones are sometimes shared within a household.<sup>4</sup> In an interview with the author,<sup>5</sup> Chief Kariuki estimated his audience is likely now over 100,000. He added that most members of adjoining locations also follow him on Twitter.

This partnership between local service provider Safaricom, Twitter and Kariuki constitutes a network that is boundless, organic and indeterminate. Although more commonly linked to Computer engineering, Gane and Beer (2008) argue that the concept of networks has moved into the social and cultural sciences to describe contemporary social phenomena. Manuel Castells, perhaps the most authoritative figure on how communication technology is redefining contemporary society, defines networks as emergent structures made up of a number of interconnected nodes, the character or topology of which may be very different depending on the type of systems of which they are a part (Castells 1996: 501). More importantly for Castells, networks are social structures. He declares that:

Networks are open structures, able to expand without limits, integrating

new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network, namely as long as they share the communication codes (Castells 1996: 501–2).

While networks in themselves are not new, Castells observes that they have taken on a new vitality in the information age, especially where they are 'powered by new information technologies' (2000: 15). However, Postill (2011) cautions us on the dangers of reducing plurality and social formations that one finds on platforms such as Twitter to a crude community versus network structure. Postill argues that rather than focusing on how a local community is affected by global networks, we should focus on understanding how different field<sup>6</sup> agents and agencies compete and cooperate over matters concerning the local residents. In this sense, rather than seeing Twitter simply as a means to prompt residents to social action, we should also be alive to the interests of individual actors, such as the chief, inform interactions in the field.

The use of Twitter in Lanet Umoja shows how pre-existing networks and spaces of societal interaction can be refashioned by a new form of media. The Twitter network in Lanet Umoja provides insights on how technologies transform networks by enabling 'an unprecedented combination of flexibility and task implementation, of co-ordinated decision making, and de-centralized execution, which provide a superior morphology for human action' (Castells 2000: 15) and at the same time, gives us insights into how individuals' proclivities, agency and motivations support such online/offline communities. As the findings show, the Twitter 'infrastructure' created primarily as a tool of community policing in Lanet Umoja is an example of the technologized character of contemporary social relations which Castells and Postill vividly describe.

Recently, many studies have been done on the everyday use of Twitter. For instance, Marwick and Boyd (2010) show how social

media users imagine a cognitive audience that though boundless, is imagined as bound. In another study of the Egyptian uprising (Meraz & Papacharissi 2013), the authors underscore the significant role of ordinary users who rise to prominence and elevate others to elite status through network actions. In more recent research on Kenya's media landscape, Tully & Ekdale (2014) show how playful and deceptively flippant use of Twitter allows users critical civic engagement and participation in key local and global debates. Omanga and Chepngetich (2013) showed how Twitter texts converged to form Kenyan news reports in a time of war. While studies on media, peace building and security in Africa abound (Botes 1996, 1998; Frère 2007), there is a yawning gap of research considering how Twitter is used for locally initiated processes such as community policing.

The use of Twitter in everyday life in Lanet Umoja has also changed social action and administration. The constant shift of language and dialect in his tweets evidence an acute awareness of the heterogeneity of his audience. Although Chief Kariuki confesses that his entry into Twitter was meant to support publicity campaigns of his regular *barazas*, a cursory look at his first tweets in 2011 show that it did not take long for his Twitter account to subsume broader roles extending from his position as chief. From lost documents, missing children, lost animals, job adverts, to other duties of a chief, the Twitter account became a platform for prompting social action. This has allowed Chief Kariuki to play a slightly different role than that of an ordinary chief.

Unlike other African countries, particularly in West Africa, chiefs in Kenya haven't always enjoyed the admiration and affection of their communities. They have often been considered extensions of a repressive state. This has been compounded by those that have abused their powers. Historically, most of Kenya's communities were governed by a council of elders. The idea of chiefs was a colonial

invention designed to entrench influence at the grassroots level. Haugerud (1995) argues that the early 20th century subjugation in Kenya began with the imposition of local chiefs in communities that formerly knew no such political authorities (Haugerud 1995: 122). This act moved power from the elders, who were considered political and judicial authorities. The colonial chiefs offered new opportunities to men without significant prior standing in their own communities. This new category of chiefs and subjects was to be a defining feature of the colonial and post-colonial Kenyan state. Throup (1988) observes that the emergent crop of chiefs were less communally minded; most were young, educated, Christian, recently installed men, eagerly accumulating land and seeking economic dominance (Throup 1988: 146, 240). Ochieng (1972) adds that their function at this time included tax collection (hut tax), chairing and adjudication on disputes and judicial matters, conducting huge infrastructural projects on their own initiative, and having the final say in matters to do with land ownership. Their power was legitimised by their collaboration with the British colonial machinery. While some chiefs used their broad powers to improve the lives of the locals by protecting their land from settler occupation, urging parents to take their children to schools, and initiating novel initiatives in agriculture, most of them blatantly abused these powers.

During the struggle against the British colonial chiefs, who were the agents of the colonial administration on the ground, quickly found themselves targets of resistance (Ochieng 1972: 64). During the Mau Mau uprising that ushered in the country's independence struggle, chiefs became targets of assassinations as they were seen to represent colonial interests. After independence, chiefs were retained as part of the provincial administration but their power was diminished and properly defined by law.

One of the enduring features the colonial chiefs bequeathed the post-colonial Kenyan

state was the *baraza*. The *baraza* referred to a formal public gathering for the purpose of interaction between the ruled and the rulers. Emerging from the Swahili culture of public debate and orality, the post-independent use of the term specifically meant a more formal forum at the level of the administrative location or division, organised by the provincial administration, usually aimed at a pro forma popular consensus, rather than robust debate (Haugerud 1995). The *baraza* was used extensively as a quasi-compulsory public meeting convened mostly by chiefs and addressed by politicians and civil servants. Prior to the opening up of the democratic space in the 90s, *barazas* were spaces of state-centric discourse deliberately meant to legitimize a provincial political ideology. Decades ago, at a time of high illiteracy and a strong culture of orality, *baraza* were effective. But, they began to lose their power and influence in the late 90s. It was no longer possible to coerce participation as it had been before when members of the public had to close their businesses to attend to the chief's *baraza*. The rapidly changing political landscape coupled with the diminishing role of chiefs greatly undermined the *baraza*. Furthermore, historical baggage continues to hamper interaction between administrative chiefs and members of their locale. Although in the modern Kenya state the role of chiefs is less visible and far less intrusive, there is still a residual negative perception of chiefs. This perception continues to undermine their efforts.

Chief Kariuki's efforts on Twitter are a deliberative practice aimed at not only community policing but also reinventing and refashioning the *baraza* through social media.<sup>7</sup> Through several interviews with locals in Lanet and the chief himself, it became clear that nearly all interactions with the chief were via Twitter, except where face to face deliberation was required (in which case youth rarely attended). A young man, Polo, summarised how youth engagement with the *baraza* has changed from the use of Twitter:

We never attended the *baraza*, and neither do we plan to attend any in future but with Twitter we feel we are somehow part of the *baraza*. Where is the time anyway, when you need to look for work and food, in the first place?<sup>8</sup>

However, for most of the middle-aged residents, Twitter has simply complemented the actual *baraza*. A shop owner who lives just metres away from the chief's office reported the following to the researcher:

We always make a point of attending the *baraza* at the chief's court when called upon to do so. But of course, with the popularity of Twitter here, he (Chief Kariuki) has drastically reduced the frequency of such face-to-face meetings. Still, for those issues that require a face-to-face interaction we feel obliged to attend. It is still important.<sup>9</sup>

This paper does not argue that Twitter entirely replaces the face-to-face *baraza* in Lanet Umoja. Rather, it argues that Twitter complements the *baraza* and opens further space for communication between the chief and the public.<sup>10</sup> This is due in part to the fact that unlike the post-colonial *baraza*, Twitter creates the impression of equality between the chief and the public.

Today, social media is an integral part of Kenya's social and political dynamics and has been effectively used in driving positive change, galvanizing and channelling public discontent, political mobilization, and governance and civil awareness. Among the various social media platforms, Twitter has been a key medium used in popular movements in Kenya such as a recent Doctors strike and in the coverage of sporting and political events in the country. For example, perceptions of the military operation undertaken by the Kenyan Defence forces against the Somali militant group al Shabaab were influenced by Twitter (Omanga & Chepngetich, 2013).

### Twitter, group action and register in the 'new *baraza*'

The 'new *baraza*' represents the increasingly mediatized deliberative practice that is complementing and in some instances appearing to displace the age-old *baraza* in Kenya. At its core, the 'new *baraza*' is shaped by social media, specifically Twitter and mass mobile phone text messaging, thus transcending economic and technological hurdles and vastly transforming deliberative practice and group action in local communities. This section will demonstrate how the 'new *baraza*' deploys the public for community policing through group action, uses specific linguistic register and language choice to communicate, and re-articulates geographical space through tweets.

According to the chief, his almost 20 tweets per day reach all segments of society including school heads, church leaders, the police and ordinary citizens. He claims this has helped to drastically reduced crime. It was his crime-busting tweets that brought him the global limelight, even catching the attention of global media powerhouses such as CNN, Associated Press, and the Daily Telegraph, among others. He was so successful that even petty criminals and bootleggers took to following him on Twitter to avoid being caught off guard. This series of tweets which succeeded in foiling robberies, mobilising villagers for emergency rescue operations and uniting missing children with their parents gave Chief Kariuki the needed online influence that vastly expanded his network.

The 'new *baraza*' is not simply a network maintained through Twitter. It differs from the old *baraza* in the sense that it is spontaneous, organic, and versatile. The old *baraza* is largely routinized as a strategic ritual. This section will focus on Chief Kariuki's tweets that mobilised group action, or rather those deliberately designed to coordinate a large number of people to focus on a common goal.

In a one of his many accounts now covered by international media (Karimi 2012),



Chief Kariuki describes how on one chilly evening he got a distress call from a neighbour whose house was being broken into by burglars. He turned to Twitter, and typed a tweet in Swahili:

*Kuna wezi kwa baba Kelven saa hii pale Tuinuane. wako sitting room. tafadhali tusaaidiane.* (There are thieves in Kelven's dad's house at this moment. They are in his living room. Please let us all help!).

The response was almost instant. Barely a minute later, there was a follow up tweet from the chief announcing:

*Hao wakora wametoroka. asante kwa wale walio jitolea.* (Those thugs have now run away, many thanks to all who volunteered).

Residents who subscribed to his tweets had jumped into action, surrounded the house and in the process scared the thugs who fled into the night. These tweets and many others like them have prompted group action and mobilised members of Lanet Umoja in real time to respond to emergencies. This has made the chief very popular. However, there are residents who claim that the Lanet Umoja residents defy the name of their village (*umoja* means unity) and that such group action does not work seamlessly.<sup>11</sup> Kamau, who runs a gambling game at Umoja Shpping centre, explained:

I have not heard of anyone leaving their house as a result of a Twitter-led distress call. How can you? Imagine the risk you expose yourself to by venturing out when armed robbers are scampering away in panic. I just think most robbers simply disappear in the darkness because they are also on the platform and they fear confrontations with people. Everyone knows this so no one leaves their house.<sup>12</sup>

However, Chief Kariuki denies such sentiments. He does accept the fact that most robbers escape since they are part of the network. He sees this as a form of crime prevention despite the fact that the communication flows within the network facilitates robbers' easy escape. One assistant chief argued that there was a need to rethink the use of Twitter in community policing since the network was good for prevention of crime but not apprehension of criminals. She argued:

Our work as civil servants in charge of security is evaluated purely on actual arrests. For as long as robbers keep being part of our 'intelligence' network, we are failing terribly. We might say that we are preventing crime but we need to also make actual arrests of these criminals. Also, we realise that sending distress calls via Twitter only makes robbers more vicious since they panic and imagine the entire village is aware of their whereabouts. As a matter of fact I know of many of our police officers who are reluctant to respond to network initiated alarms because of the probability of running into a panicked gang of criminals who would fire at the slightest hint of movement. The network's greatest weakness is the broadcasting of what I feel is security intelligence which should only be consumed by a small relevant public.<sup>13</sup>

However, Chief Kariuki feels that such a narrow definition of community policing evidenced by actual arrests of criminals is not helpful. The emphasis on arrests and conviction only leads to hardening criminals once they are released from prisons. He also believes that the best form of security comes from below and involves the community as their own policemen. It is worth noting that no incidences of criminals turning violent towards either policemen or victims of crime have been reported in Lanet Umoja.

Nevertheless, the chief's Twitter performance often goes beyond responding to security matters and, as the following section will show, emergencies and distress calls are only a part of what is essentially a broader deliberative practice that allows Chief Kariuki to experiment with various roles through his position as a chief. Among the first of such tweets was in November 2011 when an elderly man fell into a freshly dug latrine:

*Kuna mzee dani ya shimo umoja 2 area. tume ongea nayeye na simu lalini mteja sasa.* (There is an old man who just fell inside an unused latrine near Umoja 2 area. I spoke to him a while ago on phone but his phone has gone off).

There was an instant response especially from villagers living in Umoja 2 area and within hours the old man was pulled out alive but with broken limbs. The confirmation was relayed in a subsequent Tweet about two hours later:

*Tumempata sasa. yuhai asante* (We found him. He is alive, thanks).

Chief Kariuki's mode of linguistic register is deliberate and meant to specifically address the residents of his village who are mostly composed of the urban working class, small time traders and mostly peasant farmers. Scholars, journalists, international and local NGOs, professionals and government agencies also follow him to gain insights. His use of Kiswahili to summon group action demonstrates a conscious awareness of the diversity and breadth of his public. The use of the local language is not used simply because of its widespread use in the locality, but also because it is meant to spur a specific and mostly prompt action from the public. For instance on January 19, 2013 the following tweet was posted:

*Kwa mama Sammy muwa karibu na trasformer kuna wezi wanaiba mabati. majirani saidieni.* (There are thieves

*at Sammy's mum, near the electricity transformer, stealing iron roofing sheets, neighbours please help).*

Shortly after, the results of the distress call are confirmed in a subsequent tweet:

*Wezi wameangusha mabati na kutoroka. wananchi asanteni kwa kurespond.* (Thieves have dumped the iron sheets and taken off. Many thanks to all residents who responded).

In several interviews with residents of the location, these kind of tweets indeed helped in greatly expanding the chief's audience. However, a few of them felt that a steady stream of these kinds of messages had created an inaccurate impression that the location is insecure. In one of the focus group discussions, one participant went even further, suggesting that he missed out on an employment opportunity in Nakuru town merely because he resides in Lanet Umoja so he might be one of the thieves everyone keeps reading about in the network. He added:

*Once, some property got lost and I was wrongly linked to the loss as a result of the chief's tweet. The infrastructure created by the network here in Lanet Umoja does not allow one to clear one's name if wrongly accused.*

The researcher could not independently verify these claims since Chief Kariuki is not known to post names of suspected criminals on the platform. Still, most residents, especially the older members and those gainfully employed as business men and professionals, laud these efforts and are full of praise for the chief and his innovations. The chief himself argues that just because crimes in Nakuru and other areas are not reported does not mean that there is not also crime there.

In fact, crime in Lanet Umoja is not common and resident opinions suggests that Twitter has helped drastically reduce crime.<sup>14</sup> Most of the respondents interviewed cited



the informative nature of the tweets as the main reason they continue to follow Chief Kariuki. About 90 per cent of the interviewees said that the tweets had a generally positive impact on their lives. Interestingly, even those who felt that the chief's tweets were not of any help to them remained subscribed to the platform. Most felt that the platform kept them apprised of current events and the local situation in terms of jobs, security, and other issues of development. Indeed, Chief Kariuki's texts have become a powerful ritual punctuating the daily life of Lanet Umoja. The mere routine of receiving these texts contributes to a sense of affinity towards the community.

The manner of address, referencing specific residents and geographical points by name, demonstrated in the previous tweet's address of 'Mama Sammy or Sammy's mother' (a common respectful way of addressing women by reference to their motherhood), is designed to produce a specific action in the addressee. The informality and familiarity of the tweets reveals fairly close social linkages between the chief, the geographical space and the addressed public. Hundreds of tweets from Chief Kariuki's account were informal in this way and implied the existence of a social network within the public, where knowledge of particular places and specific people was crucial for participation in the desired action. A good example is the following series of tweets following the incident of a stolen cow in early February 2013:

*Kuna ngombe ya Red imebiwa Baraka saa hii. Wezi wameipeleka kuelekea Kiamunyeki.* (There is a red cow that has been stolen in Baraka right now. The thieves have driven it towards Kiamunyeki).

A subsequent tweet isolated and activated the public:

*Watu wa Kiamunyeki tafadhari saidieni. Imeonekana ikielekwa huko ikipitia Kwa Mungai.* (People of

Kiamunyeki please help. The cow has just been driven past Mungai's house).

A further tweet addressed to the wider public reports closure and success:

*Ngombe imepatikana. Wezi wameicha. Iko karibu kwa kakapole. Asante!* (The cow has been found. The thieves abandoned it. It is near Kakapole. Thanks!)

Like the other previous tweets, this series of tweets requires knowledge of specific persons such as Mungai, and places such as Kakapole and Kiamunyeki. It specifically addresses a small fraction of the public who live in Lanet Umoja, and more specifically those that live along the path taken by the thieves stealing the cow. While the two tweets help in locating the stolen cow, and also help the thieves escape if they receive Kariuki's tweets, the last tweet that provides closure and reports success is extremely important. These tweets serve several functions. At the superficial level it appears an innocent update merely meant to inform on the progress and to assure closure. Addressed to the entire public on his Twitter account, the message is an encouragement to other residents of the different sections of Lanet Umoja location that a crime has been counteracted, and also serves a broader function of positioning the network for similar response to future texts on crime that also require group action. Third, and increasingly more important, is the wider online public that is mostly not resident. These include journalists, opinion leaders in government, business and local and international bodies, who are steadily becoming an influential segment of this network. Indeed, it is this segment of the audience that has allowed Chief Kariuki to gain both local and international recognition for work in community policing and innovation in carrying out the functions of a chief. As a result, he has landed invitations to address a UN function in Geneva as well as invitations to local and international

conferences. He has also been hosted in various media shows in Kenya and has recently been promoted to the position of a senior chief by the government.

The media publicity and near celebrity status of the chief has had its drawbacks. While there is the usual jealousy from his superiors, most of who have never travelled abroad, the greater challenge is the huge expectations that the chief has to deal with every day. Indeed, most youth interviewed felt that they had been let down in some way by the chief. They felt that the chief should do more with his accumulated social capital. However, most of what the youth claimed the chief should do is clearly outside his jurisdiction as chief. His global status is seen to enable him to solve all social and material problems assumed to be the concern of elected leaders. One youth in the focus group said:

I think the chief has ascended further than we can reach him. He is inaccessible. He should try and come to our level so that we can have a discussion on how best to move our village forward. He has all these international connections yet we, the youth of Lanet Umoja, are jobless and desperate. Today we just see big cars with foreign number plates, drive to his place. They have never stopped to even ask us what we think about the chief, or this Twitter thing. All media reports are told from the chief's perspective.<sup>15</sup>

Others claimed the chief had become a TV personality and celebrity who had lost touch with issues at the local level. Further, his ever-increasing audience, and the need to address both his international and local audience, comes at a great price to the local residents who actually receive these tweets as text messages. The chief says:

I am being watched and followed throughout the world and my international followers are crucial as they enable me to tell the story of Lanet

Umoja across the borders. Recently I was in the Silicon Valley, in California. I have also talked to US police in Austin, Texas on how to use Twitter in their security operations. All these social connections are important. I learnt that these short codes are in all countries but most people are simply not aware of their existence.

Several respondents complained that their inboxes are full with messages that have little to do with their day-to-day lives. Peter,<sup>16</sup> a father of one, said:

I have pulled out of that subscription. I also asked my wife to unsubscribe from that thing. I am being inundated with irrelevant information.

On the other hand, there is also subtle pressure from the network for the chief to tweet every so often. In a recent interview,<sup>17</sup> he confessed that if he goes a day without sending tweets, he receives calls from Lanet Umoja residents, or collective tweets from KOT (Kenyans on Twitter) asking for his whereabouts.

Upon closer scrutiny, however, it seems that managing public expectations at the local level, and the corresponding social relationships, especially with youth, is the greatest challenge to using Twitter effectively in this way. Chief Kariuki himself acknowledges that he cannot possibly please everyone. As chief he has to occasionally make arrests, confiscate local illicit brew and solve disputes.

Still, not all tweets that solicit group action are successful. Tweets announcing stolen cars and those reporting goods stolen long after the event are meant more to caution and inform the public, rather than demand for an instant group response. On several occasions, there were tweets that addressed specific groups within the public to be aware of the existence of a pattern of crime or event in their neighbourhoods. These did not focus on an actual, real-time act of crime, but warned of the possibility of the recurrence of similar acts in future. These tweets,

all done in English, played surveillance and preventive roles that were meant to bolster preparedness in the event of an actual act of crime. For instance, in 2011 Chief Kariuki retweeted the following tweets from one of his assistant chiefs:

Hi! Beware of chicken thieves in murunyu.

Beware, there's a man in Baraka (thief) armed with a panga. If you see him raise an alarm!

Chief Kariuki also posted the following in English:

Please, beware, there are thieves with master keys capable of opening any padlock don't leave your premises unattended.

One of the glaring differences with the tweets that call for emergency group action and those offering warnings is their use of language. In virtually all of the tweets since Chief Kariuki joined Twitter, he has written tweets that require immediate group action in the event of crime in Kiswahili. English was mostly used in tweets that were meant to raise the alarm and provide warning of the possibility of crime. Kiswahili is understood by most irrespective of age and education. Therefore, it is the most effective language to use in times of emergency and in requests for quick social mobilisation. On the other hand, the use of English in posts about crime and danger evince a diminished sense of urgency.

In addition to mobilising the public to react to crime in real time, some of the tweets Chief Kariuki sends also mobilise the public in a different, tempered manner. These tweets perform the function of social connection. For example, there are tweets that help to connect lost children with their parents, reunite strayed domestic animals with their owners, or help aged citizens find their way home. Chief Kariuki's tweets facilitate these kinds of connections on an almost

daily basis. In a tweet sent out by the chief on the January 18, 2013, a child was reported lost and a day later found:

*Simon kihonge wa ma nyambura na uniform ya Little Angels amepotea. kwao ni kwa mama charity wa mutitu.*  
(Simon Kihonge of Nyambura (name of a place), wearing a 'Little Angels' (name of a school) is lost. He is from Mutito, at Charity's mum home.)

The tweet is specific and demands social and intimate geographical knowledge of the persons named and the places mentioned to initiate action from the public. Although consumed by an undefined public within the network, it speaks directly to a specific category within the public. The consistent pattern of using names of persons and places assumed to be readily understood by his public shows how Chief Kariuki, despite the ever expanding network, still manages to stay loyal to his core function, performing the everyday roles of a chief. That evening, he tweeted that the boy had been found:

*Simon kihonge aliyepotea Jana yuko kwa Mama magiri karibu little Angels. wazazi wake wamuangalie huko.*  
(Simon Kihonge who was yesterday reported lost has been found. He is at Mama Magiri near Little Angels and his parents should pick him from there.)<sup>18</sup>

Providing closure to each incident reported on Twitter serves several functions, as mentioned previously. It provides confidence to all stakeholders that it is worth taking action. It also demonstrates the merits of this activity on Twitter. While there are literally hundreds of tweets that follow the pattern of problem identification-solution-closure, not all have a closure tweet. This is not because the issue has not been resolved but, according to Chief Kariuki,<sup>19</sup> because for some incidents he has highlighted on Twitter, closure are communicated offline. Other modes of

communicating closure offline are still as active, if not more active as Twitter.

### ***The 'new baraza' and new modes of experimentation***

The 'new *baraza*' is extremely dynamic and adaptable to pluralistic conditions. In addition, the 'new *baraza*' appropriates and takes on the personality and individual proclivities of its key actor, the chief. In so doing, it is able to serve both social/community needs and also meet the personal aspirations of the chief. It conflates a personal space and a public space. In many ways takes the form of the post-colonial *baraza* it described by Heuggerud (1995) whose main characteristics were monologue, pro-forma consensus, and no debate.

In an interview with Chief Kariuki by a local TV stations in Kenya (NTV Kenya 2013), the host marvelled at the huge number of tweets with a religious tone. Chief Kariuki said 'I am a pastor with United Methodist Church.' Indeed the researcher found a retweet from American evangelist Joel Osteen:

Don't stay where you are. Learn how God can take you ABOVE AND BEYOND when you stretch your faith.

In the first days after setting up his Twitter account Chief Kariuki's tweets reflected his function as a chief and his religious convictions. In addition to sending out invitations for *baraza* meetings, Chief Kariuki used Twitter as an online *baraza*, sharing information in his tweets that would normally be shared at the *baraza*. Chief Kariuki's tweets show that the formal content of *barazas* has not changed much since the 80s (Haugerud 1995) despite Chief Kariuki's experiment with a new medium. The tweets serve as an 'online gathering' to establish pro forma consensus rather than allow for debate, passing government directives or policies on health, agriculture or civic issues, on to the public. Chief Kariuki deftly intersperses tweets announcing a polio vaccination campaign, free medical clinic, or a crime report, with

religious messages in a way that would not be possible in the *baraza*.

The study found that despite the existence of the *baraza* as both a virtual and physical space, elderly citizens still respond positively to attending actual *barazas* in Lanet Umoja. The younger residents rarely show up for the *barazas*. Those interviewees who attend the *barazas* in person also confessed that the tweets have helped improve the popularity of the *barazas*. Most of them said they did not attend the *barazas* before the chief started tweeting and that the tweets the chief sends to inform the public of upcoming *barazas* have helped boost actual attendance. Although most residents consider *barazas* to be crucial for discussing certain issues, some of the residents argued that there was no need to attend a *baraza* since most of the information would still be posted on the network.

In some ways residents of Lanet Umoja receive an 'information overload.' Some respondents felt that some of the messages the chief sends are irrelevant to them and only benefit a few people, especially those that advertised high-end commodities. Even though they felt it was irritating for the chief to send out these messages, they felt it could be beneficial to other people within the network. The most scathing response was from unemployed youth in the location who argued that the network was inundated with irrelevant texts and that the chief used the network for personal benefit. That being said, residents were almost unanimous that tweets posted on the network should be read. More than 90 per cent of those interviewed felt that the religious tweets were encouraging. The following tweets represent only a sample of what forms a significant portion of Chief Kariuki's almost daily religious tweets:

Even in times of hurt or disappointment, God is with you. No matter how you feel, He will never leave you confused or discouraged.

If you acknowledge the good things that God has put inside of you, then

you'll see those good things increase in your life.

Don't let negative pictures play on the movie screen of your mind. You own the remote control. All you have to do is change the channel.

His performance as a pastor on Twitter is equally sensitive to specific seasons and days like Christmas and Easter:

Happy Birthday Jesus! I love you. (sent on Christmas Eve, 2011)

As this year comes to a close, reflect back on 2011 with gratitude and remember how God blessed you with His favour this year. Happy new yr. (sent on last day of 2011)

The spatial dynamics of a live *baraza* and its historical tradition of formality and state-centric discourse would hardly permit these kind of religious messages. The online *baraza* built by Chief Kariuki enables him to use Twitter to indirectly challenge the norms and unwritten rules defining his office. The network allows him to employ his identities – that of a pastor and a former teacher. Chief Kariuki exploits the dispersed nature of his audience. According to him, aside from assisting him in his role as a chief, Twitter allows him share words of encouragement from God.

Indeed according to interviewees, most of the tweets that were retweeted to other people not within the network were the inspirational messages, followed closely by those that publicise an employment opportunity, lost items and of course those providing security alerts. In another interview, the chief reported that some of his religious tweets have effected positive change and influence in his community.<sup>20</sup> He cites one case in which a woman on the verge of committing suicide changed her mind after receiving an encouraging retweet from one of Chief Kariuki's followers. With Chief Kariuki's fame

on the rise, media routinely referring to him as 'Kenya's tweeting chief,' and the overall effectiveness of his use of Twitter, his Twitter followers have increased exponentially from a few hundred to thousands. It was hardly surprising that as the network continued to swell, he commoditised his newly acquired social capital by 'selling' space on his network:

I am a latter day Robin Hood. I take from the rich businesspeople who want to sell in the network, and I share with my people.<sup>21</sup>

The exploitation of this space as a market was motivated by the realisation that, at the mere tap of a button, Chief Kariuki had access to a vast audience at almost no cost. Additionally, his position as a chief in the village ensured that the commoditised texts were not perceived as profit-seeking, but rather as an extension of the chief's function. The task of coordinating communication between wandering children and their parents, lost animals and their owners, and sending regular updates on crime proved rather too costly for Chief Kariuki to sustain. In addition to paying Safaricom a shilling for every tweet sent to the special digit, which is then sent to hundreds of thousands of those not on Twitter, Chief Kariuki bears the cost of calling parents or animal owners, or potential crime targets on the progress of their 'cases.' It was on these grounds that he would occasionally 'sell' space to sustain the performance. Proprietors of schools and colleges were his first customers. On May 1, 2012 the first such tweet was sent on behalf of a private university seeking students for admission. It was sent under the guise of providing partial and full scholarships:

GRE TSA UNIVERSITY- is offering partial and full sponsorship for degree and diploma. Application forms at Chief's office.

Gretsa University, a private university whose main campus is located over 300 kilometres

away from Lanet Umoja, sought to overcome geographical limitations and reach a the comparatively remote location by exploiting the market potential of Chief Kariuki's Twitter follower base. The chief ceded his role in the 'new *baraza*' virtual space and effectively offered access to his audience to others who, by using his 'voice' and social capital, exploit it for financial gain. The following tweets provide examples:

Improve your child's performance. B4 schools open let them watch a DVD on Leading a Purpose Driven Student Life Call +254722\*\*\*\*\*

Kena Institute of Technology n Hospitality has a Modern comp lab, kitchen, restaurant n beauty room for practicals. FREE DRIVING 0713\*\*\*\*\*

Analysis of Chief Kariuki's tweets reveals the exclusive use of English in texts with a commercial intent. These tweets clearly targeted residents of Lanet Umoja perceived to be in need of opportunities for higher education. According to Chief Kariuki, for every tweet with a commercial intent a charge was required. Normally, this charge would be in the form of airtime credit or cash so as to sustain his other tweets. Chief Kariuki said:

The commercial imperative was inevitable, but it was important especially for residents of my location who are less endowed. I have helped old poor widows sell their animals at the best prices; I have helped residents sell land, household goods, as well as get information on institutions that are hiring.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the individuals interviewed in Lanet Umoja have a high regard for the chief and most appreciate his work and innovation. Through the Twitter-enabled network, they feel the chief has brought a sense of belonging and cohesiveness in Lanet Umoja. Indeed, most feel that his way of administering

through social media has changed their perception of new media technologies. Still, there is a small minority who feel that the chief is making a lot of money for himself through the platform. Some interviewees felt the chief should not be taking any money.

## Conclusion

The nature of the network built through Twitter by Chief Kariuki is indeterminate, boundless and organic in growth. In activating a segment of the public for purposes of instant group action, the public is assumed to be potentially active and bounded. In activating the public as recipients of spiritual nourishment, the boundaries are blurred and the same public is largely constituted as passive, almost analogous to the performance of a church pastor and his congregants.

These tweets represent a refashioning of the age-old *baraza* by the chief which, although not entirely substituting the traditional *baraza* held at the chief's office, allows room for experimentation, creativity and variety. Largely due to the Twitter network, Chief Kariuki has drastically reduced the frequency and content of his physical *baraza* meetings. Much of what Chief Kariuki would relay in *barazas* such as polio campaigns, medical clinics and other government programmes can simply be tweeted. These announcements also reach more people faster and more effectively than they would if they were only made at the physical *baraza* gatherings.

The refashioned *baraza* allows experimentation with the chief's other roles, creating a virtual 'pulpit,' from which his roles as chief and pastor blend. Meanwhile, as the costs of maintaining the network rise in tandem with an expanding audience, Chief Kariuki's increasingly sends advertisement tweets, signifying a commercialisation of this space. In an interview with the author, Chief Kariuki<sup>23</sup> told of the burden of fame and how he has to manage both his Twitter-constituted network and directly serve members of Lanet Umoja who require regular government services. Despite this enormous task, Chief Kariuki considers his work a calling analogous to



that of a missionary. It is a role that has enabled his self-realisation and one that also gives him satisfaction that Lanet Umoja is a more secure and cohesive place because of his innovative use of social media.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See NTV Kenya interview, The Trend. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDCFnZnpfGQ>
- <sup>2</sup> Later, I term this refashioned form of the *baraza* as the 'new *baraza*' a noun aimed at capturing the increasing mediated form of this deliberative space.
- <sup>3</sup> Phone interview with Chief Kariuki, Lanet Umoja, 7 September 2013.
- <sup>4</sup> It was not possible for the researcher to determine the exact number of followers using the short code 8988.
- <sup>5</sup> Phone interview with Chief Kariuki, Lanet Umoja, 29 September 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> Postill's idea of field is borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field practice and appropriations of the early work from the Manchester School of Anthropology.
- <sup>7</sup> The infrastructure of Twitter, especially through the text messaging as devised in Lanet Umoja, does not allow as much interaction and dialogue as it should. In a sense, its deliberative practices resembled those of the state-centric 80s *baraza*.
- <sup>8</sup> Interview, Lanet Umoja, 23 May 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview, Lanet Umoja, 23 May 2014.
- <sup>10</sup> Observations and interviews, Lanet Umoja, June/July 2014.
- <sup>11</sup> Interview with residents at Umoja Shopping Centre, 1 July 2014.

- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Kamau at Umoja Shopping Centre, 1 July 2014.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Assistant Chief, Lanet Umoja, 23 July 2014.
- <sup>14</sup> Interviews and focus group discussions held on diverse dates between June and end of July, 2014.
- <sup>15</sup> Focus group discussion, 23 July 2014.
- <sup>16</sup> This man's name was changed to protect his identity.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with Chief Kariuki, Eldoret, August 2014.
- <sup>18</sup> The unplanned geography of Lanet Umoja is very difficult for small kids to navigate on their way to and from school. Most of the kids reported lost have taken the wrong path. Some respondents felt that related tweets may have created the impression of a crisis of stolen children. However, there have not been any incidences of missing children being abducted (as opposed to having gotten lost).
- <sup>19</sup> Interview, Nakuru town, June 2014.
- <sup>20</sup> Interview with Chief Kariuki, Nakuru town, 23 June 2014.
- <sup>21</sup> Interview, Lanet Umoja, 29 August 2014.
- <sup>22</sup> Interview, Lanet Umoja, 29 August 2014.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview, Lanet Umoja, 29 August 2014.

### Acknowledgements

This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

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**How to cite this article:** Omanga, D 2015 'Chieftaincy' in the Social Media Space: Community Policing in a Twitter Convened *Baraza*. *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, 4(1): 1, pp. 1–16, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/sta.eq>

**Published:** 05 January 2015

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