Social media, Ethics and Development in the Postmodernist Malawian Society

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Abstract

The paper argues that in the postmodernist era, there is great likelihood for people to use social media networks for wrong reasons rather than for promoting "the good" as the great Greek Philosopher, Plato, would demand. This is so because the ultimate goal of a postmodernist society is a commercial one, which is chiefly characterized by a high spirit of competition and general loss of holiness. The paper observes that in a postmodernist society, the people are greatly motivated by the trendy and that there is dominance of the non-realistic aspects, which lead them to lose their sense of humanity. In most cases, the people become mechanical in their pursuit of happiness, wealth and power. At the same time, subscription to the non-realistic aspects of life compels them to be continuous seekers of knowledge. As a result, this aspect makes it possible for nations whose economies are largely knowledge based to thrive. Hence, as more and more people embrace social media, development accelerates while the people lose their long cherished sense of virtue. Thus, social media is a necessary evil in the postmodernist era. After all, the end justifies the means.

Key words: *postmodernism, the queer, hyperreality, sublimation, de-individuation*

Paying attention to the media buzz and what is happening around leaves us without any doubt that we are in the era of postmodernism. Hawthorn (2005:64) considers postmodernism as an aura of newness where things inhabit novel realities that are largely extreme, non-traditional and idealistic culturally, economically and ideologically. The postmodernist society in itself has become a problematic space. One of the problems associated with postmodernism is its subscription to the queer which by definition is whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate and the dominant (Selden *et al.* 2005).

Generally speaking, the queer dismisses the essentializing tendencies of categorizing things. With the queer, nothing should be treated as established, stable or unified. In fact, the queer re-instates that which society forbids and celebrates deviant practices of whatever kind (Selden *et al.* 2005:254). However, according to Sigmund Freud's idea of the pleasure principle as propounded in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1923), the prevailing aim of a human being is to seek freedom to do what he or she wants and in most cases, to do evil. No wonder there is the emergence and proliferation of social media networks in this era of postmodernism in the form of Myspace, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Twoo and Flickr, just to mention a few which have revolutionized the contemporary society. Notwithstanding the benefits people accrue from these networks and their apparent disadvantages, there are serious positive and negative implications which postmodernism and the queer bear on the role of social media in economic, social and cultural development.

The paper attempts to explore the implications of postmodernism and the queer on social media, ethics and development in Malawi. It highlights the moral dilemmas and interrogates the undeniable opportunities and challenges social media pose in people's quest for freedom, development and happiness in the contemporary Malawian society. The discussion is based on the premise that social media is a necessary evil to the socio-political development of the contemporary Malawian society. The paper pitches Plato's ideas on ethics propounded in *The Republic* against those by Sigmund Freud on Psychoanalysis as expressed in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1923), and taps on a repertoire of personal experiences with social media network users at my home and at the university where I work.

In explaining why a person needs to be moral, Plato argues that morality is not a matter of social approval or external reward or punishment (not even the after-life reward or punishment) but it is its own reward. He reiterates that there is a difference between acting from deliberate choice and acting from a generous impulse or acting on animal appetite (Lee, 1987). There is little doubt in this era of postmodernism that people are compelled to act on generous impulse and animal appetite such as appetite for sex, fun, fame and wealth and that this is the main drive for development covertly or overtly through what Freud calls sublimation. Facebook and other social media are well known for bringing people together for parties, illegal drug business, terrorism and other acts disapproved or frowned upon by the society, but they have also been successfully used for a good cause. LinkedIn, for example, has registered great successes in bringing members of particular professions together (Zalta, 2012).

Ideally, morality is the interest of both the state and the individual (Lee, 1987). However, postmodernism has made the state to be disinterested in morality by pushing it to the private space as people would like to pursue their individual interests at the expense of the public ones. By using social media to interact with other men or women, boys or girls other than one's own husband, wife, girlfriend/boyfriend or family as the case may be, it amounts to injustice or "the wrong" on the grounds that it serves the interests of oneself (Lee, 1987:29). But in today's society, it is through such contacts that people come across enormous opportunities. Since people in a postmodernist society mainly aim at satisfying their individual interests leading to self fulfillment (though illusory), social media are handy in making them achieve that goal. Today's knowledge economy requires that people continuously search for new information. What the youth and young professional adults do by extensively linking up with people world over and continuously searching for required knowledge using social media, undeniably makes them more knowledgeable which is suitable for the knowledge economy. At my house, there are sharp differences in general knowledge between the two nephews who stay with me, both of whom are pursuing diploma in Business Management with a UK based Association of Business Executive (ABE). The more knowledgeable of the two is an active social media user having been born and raised in Lilongwe and the less knowledgeable one is a typical home boy who does not use social media.

Interestingly, the two nephews also differ significantly in their level of morality with the morality of "the village boy" surpassing that of "the town boy". Yet, of the two, "the town boy" is able to do a lot of things better than "the village boy" that would be of relevance to the economic development of the country. It has been observed across time and space that high economic development of a country is usually characterized by moral degradation. One wonders, therefore, if Malawi can develop with strong emphasis on ethics. As long as her main aspiration as a state remains that of attaining high economic development, morality shall become a matter of mere convenience as people are preoccupied with satisfying their individual interests. However, according to Plato, "the right" is 'that which serves the interests of the other party, promotes the happiness of the other party rather than the self' (Lee 1987:40). The apparent weakness of this view is that it

overlooks the fact that a human being is by nature a pleasure loving animal. The public interest or the interest of "the other' at the expense of 'the self' being the basis of ethical predispositions as advanced by Plato is reduced to mere abstraction in a postmodernist society. It has been a challenge to humanity across time and across space because it is natural for people to pursue their individual interests. Actually, this aspect is the one that leads to personal development such as getting married, building houses or starting a business. Since the main interest of the state is the common good, it is doubtful that this common good is the sum total of the interests, desires and aspirations of all individual members of the society when social media enables individuals to live in their own worlds. It is implied in Sigmund Freud's conception of identity formation that two people seeing or experiencing the same reality construe it differently as a result of differences in personalities and previous experiences (Newton, 1988:204). This is in line with postmodernism where reality is viewed as nothing more than a mental construct.

Plato, through Socrates, asserts that true morality resides in fact, in giving satisfaction to the three elements namely: physical desire, ambition and intellect (Lee, 1987: 35) and that " the right" or morality is the interest of the strong (Lee, 1987:15). However, in a Postmodernist era, fashion and illusion are the real goals of the society. The trendy as seekers of happiness have no time for pursuing "the right". People are just not because they value justice for what it is, but for the good reputation it brings. However, in the postmodernist era, good reputation does not bring as much honour as it should and is largely seen as an impediment to happiness. In schools and colleges and the work place in Malawi, the just and strict are abhorred or despised as much as they are denied opportunities. As a result, they tend to be poor and powerless although society agrees that they are good people. One wonders whether the intellect can be strong enough to hold back intense desire, ambition, fear of rejection or need for acceptance and hence achieve real morality in an era when social media exposes people to the beauty of sophisticated fashions, ever-changing trends and trappings of glory. Gauntlett (2008) observes that in a postmodernist era, ideas about the self have changed significantly so that identity is fluid and transformable than ever before. Further to this, social media makes it impossible for people's private spaces to be protected in an era characterized by general loss of an aura of holiness. In most homes and educational institutions, children and adults alike are continuously exposed to tempting, ugly and false material through art, entertainment and social media networks. Most of this reality being exposed is made up of new, non-realistic and attractive things at a time when everyone wants to live their own lives. It is emphasized that the lives people live, how they look like, talk and do things as depicted in social media, for example, may be divorced from the truth. Plato views all such exposures as mere illusions which are very dangerous to society (Lee, 1987). The human mind is very curious, always wanting to know more and to imitate. However, curiosity relates to the spirit of being over-ambitious which Plato dismisses as discreditable and imitation is viewed as an impediment to the pursuit of truth (Lee, 1987:29). Yet the same are desirable tenets for a knowledge-based economy.

What complicates the role of social media further is the level of disagreement about standards of correctness amongst them. Plato argues that no two qualified persons in a particular profession are in disagreement about the standard of correctness in their particular profession, and are in that sense not in competition with each other. But this does not seem to be the case with social media. While one would like to maintain a certain level of sanity such as upholding a certain level of client exposure, the other goes beyond it by including nude or semi-nude photographs, a wall for text messages, voice, pop ups and others. This indicates that there is a sharp disagreement about standards, correctness, style and extent among social media networks. Plato argues that the bad (and ignorant man) will try to compete with both his like and with his opposite (Lee, 1987).

Again, one wonders what the real function of social media is, for according to Plato, the function of a thing is that which only it can do or which it does best. In other words, a thing's unique characteristic enables it to perform its function well. In line with the foregoing, some of the features of social media make them multi-purpose and hence subject to abuse. Their chief characteristic is that of collapsing both time and space. With this characteristic, people can realise the obvious advantage social media bring to people in that they enable them to experience things in real time which is good for development. But their characteristic defects such as anonymity and the element of having open accessibility can bring about enormous problems. In this regard, although the versatile nature of social media supports the assertion that the ultimate goal of a postmodernist society is a commercial one, this characteristic feature of social media has some positive and negative implications. For instance, the swift flow of information leaves people with no time to ponder over the content. It can cause them to react spontaneously and cause chaos even before the anti-riot police gets organized. In times of national elections, the element of anonymity can be exploited by creating a rumour and propagating it as truth. It is common for utter lies to go viral on social media and causing great discomfort to those this lie may target. Usually, it is too late before the social media users realise that the information that is circulating is not true. Postmodernism favours such kind of situations for it is good for business and for social advancement in general. In particular, that such scenarios force human beings to be active seekers of information in case there is something out there which they may need to know and perhaps come up with counter-discourse as a survival technique.

The observation is that people in the postmodernist era as in other eras are always driven by the life and death drives. Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1923) argues that the life of human beings is governed by libido as an energy with which mental processes and structures are invested and which generates erotic attachments. Worth noting is that for every action, the ultimate goal is production of pleasure and the wish to keep on living. The people are, therefore, always put on the edge of information seeking process lest they lag behind and get "swallowed" by events they cannot control. They are always powerless in the face of a blind technology much as Postmodernism has a more welcoming celebratory attitude towards the modern world and technology in particular (Hawthorn, 2005: 65). It is this continuous feeling of powerlessness, whether real or illusory that drives the knowledge economy.

There are concerns that social media lead to loss of interpersonal virtues such as honesty, openness and patience which can easily be judged in face-to-face negotiations (Wong, 2010: 29). The thinking is that social media eventually kills the subject. This comes about when human beings get continuously connected to a large reservoir of others. When this happens, one can easily shut off communication when he or she is bored or encounters problems. In that way, people become mechanical. According to Best *et al.* (2000: 282), people constantly challenge and invent themselves. They usually mix cultures because they have lost an understanding of their cultural values and meaning. In a postmodernist society, the assertion that social media kills the subject is further substantiated by the fact that the human identity is subsumed in the queer as his or her identity is split, decentred and unstable. As a matter of fact, in a postmodernist society, people tend to impoverish or constrain human experience of reality to a model of easy assumption. According to Borgmann (1992: 96), some social media networks subvert or displace organic social reality by allowing people to offer one another stylized versions of themselves (something which Borgmann (1984) refers to as hyperreality) rather than allowing the fullness and complexity of their real identities to be engaged.

Borgmann (1992) admits that in itself, social hyperreality is morally inert. This resonates with Sigmund freud's ideas expressed in his book, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (2003) where he

observes that the boundary between the normal and the abnormal human psyche is unstable and that we are all neurotic. According to Freud (2003), symptoms of neurosis are able to disrupt our eating, sexual relations, regular work and communication with others. This suits the postmodernist subject well as he or she is greatly motivated by the commercial at the expense of the moral for it confirms that a human being as subject is by no means intrinsically moral. In the knowledge and technology-driven postmodernist economy, a great deal of communication is not face-to face. People do not necessarily need to meet or know each other physically in order to carry out meaningful business transactions. What is more striking is that social media allows people to assume anonymous or pseudonymous identities since what matters most is the accumulation of wealth and attainment of pleasure as the final product. Identity and the process do not matter as much as the ultimate goal or outcome.

Since the ultimate goal of a postmodernist society is a commercial one, people cannot be compelled to do justice and 'the right' for their own sake, but rather for rewards and punishments they would bring. There is common observation that those who are unjust and unethical live better lives economically than the just and morally upright ones. Currently, in Malawi like other countries, the great social transformation into a highly secularized one (being the ultimate goal of globalization and the postmodernism) leaves people less ethical than ever before especially with the proliferation of fake prophets and dishonest business people, workers and spouses. With social media, people not only use false names and addresses but also form clubs or groups aimed at promoting demonic agendas by taking advantage of lack of control (Nissenbaum, 2004). As Plato observes, such attributes as vice, appearance and falsehood have more force than reality and "the right", and determine people's happiness. What complicates the situation further is that some people would rather devote themselves entirely to appearances. Hence they put up a facade that gives the illusory appearance of virtue. Plato reiterates that justice is what is good for someone else; injustice is what is to one's own interest and advantage, and is often pursued at the expense of the weaker party. This runs counter to the ideals of a postmodernist society where the spirit of outwitting each other and getting the better of the other is greatly entrenched in the pursuit of happiness, wealth and power.

Social media also affect social relationships much as it is a wonderful tool for fostering relationships. There is little doubt that most Malawians would feel uneasy to see their wives, sons or daughters engaged in private communication on social media with a whole array of people they do not know. There are observations that engrossing oneself in such acts creates the problem of alienation. When relatives from the village come to the city, they expect the hosts (parents, children or members of the extended family) to engage them by chatting them up. However, as it often happens at our home, the hosts are often so engrossed in social media communication after knocking off from work or school that they are surely alienated and in the process alienate the visitors. This is in line with the view expressed by Bakerdjieva and Feenberg (2000) who observe that people excessively check their facebook during family dinners, business meetings, romantic dates and other important functions much to the discomfort of others. One wonders if such preoccupation with social media networks leads to growing importance of humanity to warrant tolerance from culture and to leave the users alone (Turkles, 2011). If we decide to leave such users alone, we must bear in mind that this would lead to continuous construction of personal identities and even de-individuation of personal identities, distinctive kinds of communal norms and moral practices that would see humans move further and further away from the desires and aspirations of tradition and of a moral society. Since at social media network, a minor, wife or husband can do what is normally impermissible at school, work or home, this would result in the formation of an identity grounded in the person's material reality. Though abhorred due to its negative impact on culture, this new identity is good for business and for development generally, and is in line with the

tenets of a postmodernist society. This is so because materialism drives people to be on the lookout for new fashions, new developments and trends and compels people to measure up to them. People in this case use social media in such a way that their self-destructive desires receive validation and force them to seek the goods and services to satisfy their ego in Sigmund Freud's sense.

From an ethical perspective, the question being constantly posed is: Can social media really help humans to cultivate the broader intellectual virtue of knowing a virtuous life or how best to pursue it? (Spence, 2012). Simply put, can the postmodernist subject be in a position to use social media to cultivate the broader intellectual virtue of knowing what it is to live well and how best to pursue it? Or can it lead humans into developing the communication virtues such as honesty, patience, justice, loyalty, empathy and benevolence? The answer is no. Postmodernism and social media take human beings in a totally different direction away from moral demands of society. Since there is a lot of information floating around, a very small number may be responsive to the civic habits and practices of critical rationality, which eventually become weakened. This bodes poorly for the cultivation of those communicative virtues to a flourishing public sphere (Nissenbaum (2010). Promotion of extremism and reinforcement of ill-founded opinions would undoubtedly facilitate civil disobedience. It would greatly challenge the development and maintenance of what Sigmund Freud (2003) calls the collective psyche.

This discussion has highlighted the complications that postmodernism has brought on ethics in social media and their bearing on the socio-economic development of Malawi. It has been observed that in the present era of postmodernism, it is doubtful if ethics can be upheld because the main goal of the society has shifted to a largely economic one that requires constant updating of one's knowledge. The economy of a postmodernist society is knowledge based and that social media provide that needed platform for people to explore their full potentials culturally, economically and socially. It is also generally argued that strict adherence to morality may be an impediment to meaningful development because it limits the scope of viable socio-economic activities. It is therefore, not by mistake that the postmodernist society, with its subscription of the queer and distortion of stable personal and social identity has embraced social media.

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