SOCIAL (NEW) MEDIA AND THE DEEPENING OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA. (2011-2015)

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ABSTRACT

The complimentary role which the social media performs has increased the level of complexity of Nigerian politics. The increase in information flow, especially at the informal level, has bridged the wide informational gap which existed for a long time between the government and the governed. Nigeria's political history is tainted with several military incursions into governance. This was characterized by the intense emasculation of all informational avenues, especially the press. The aim of this paper is to analyze the roles of the social media in our society. It also seeks to rationalize the need for social media in a democracy and the inherent challenges, as they relate to the Nigerian experience. The paper concludes by taking into cognizance, the weak regulatory framework that should drive access and content generation.

Keywords: *social media, Nigerian experience*

INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web, and in particular, Web 2.0, is seen as a powerful medium for facilitating the growth of a media democracy as it offers participants a potential voice, a platform, and access to the means of production. Because social media allows for each person to share information instantly with a few barriers to entry across a common infrastructure, it is often held up as an example of the potential power of the social media in a democracy. Nigeria is part of the international community and we have also been caught up with the fad. Nigeria is currently ranked 8th on the global internet scale, with more than 73 million people that actively engage the internet. Opportunities that social media present in deepening democracy in the country continue to abound as more and more people get online and get connected on social networks engaging with each other on various issues, affecting them and their communities. With the growing realization that a huge percentage of Nigerians are online, and are actively engaging on issues

in the democratic space, Nigeria's political parties are increasingly using non-traditional media platforms and tools to campaign and appeal to the middle class, internet-savvy, Blackberry and smartphone toting, upwardly mobile, young men and women. The global reach, instantaneous speed and unlimited information through various channels, for example, Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp. You Tube and the like has in no small measure affected governance especially as it relates to the spread of information which could be deployed for socio-political mobilization and cohesion.

Social media provides real-time updates that often outshine that of major news sources. In fact, even major news sources are using social media more and more to provide fast coverage that reaches millions of users. Social media also allows politicians and key players in political movements to interact with each other and with constituents.

Framework of Analysis of the Social Media

The virtual political system has quickened the pace at which governments and civil societies adapt to information technologies and the future openings for active citizenship and civic engagement. Cyber optimists have been unanimous in acknowledging digital revolution as perhaps the most important development of this generation and even our lifetimes (Norris: 2001).To her, limitless information available via the internet and its ancillaries has a potential to imbue in the public a vast amount of knowledge about public affairs, more articulate in expressing their views via emails, chatrooms and more active in community affairs (Schwartz 1996). Properly utilized, the social media is a virile means of information dissemination. The social media provides a two-way channel of communication between the citizens and other gate keepers within political system such as political parties, social movements, interest groups and even the conventional news media as well as public officials and agencies of government.

To these Cyber optimists, information of international and global relevance on governance absent during the military period (Jaja, 1993) can be made readily accessible and to a large extent will have a knock-on effect in political participation, civic engagement, campaign analysis, mobilization and the building of coalitions around policy problems and advocacy. Amplifying earlier positions on the relevance of New Media, Howard Rheingold (1993), Ian Budge (1996) advanced arguments to reinforce Benjamin Barber's (1984) theory on direct Democracy. New Media to them has evolved a platform that allows opportunities for citizens" deliberation and direct decision-making through online referendums and other initiatives all geared towards devolution and grass roots mobilization to fix local problems. In tandem with this notion Fayemi (2012) in a perceptive article titled "Digital Governance in Nigeria: going beyond the hype, The Ekiti State Governments' Digital Media Case study and Lesson for the Public

Sector", eruditely submitted that the tools of new media complements its capability as tools for enhancing information and interflow of communication across numerous actors which can spark off swift social change. This change is reverberated in daily routines of e-commerce, e-publishing, e-learning, e-voting etc. All of these to Fayemi, who is also the ex-Governor of Ekiti State southwest

Nigeria, will certainly continue to serve as a key driver of employment opportunities and economic growth even in more advanced democracies.

Pessimism

The pessimistic disposition of some political analysts regarding social media, especially in Nigeria is hinged on its volatility and concerns about sourcing, authenticity and fairness. The digital culture as exemplified by the internet, particularly the social media, can be at once liberating and equally capable of spinning out of control(Fayemi: 2012).The institutional linkage between the internet-generated democratic revival has been called to question by the skeptics who while acknowledging the utility of the social media as a valuable supplement to traditional forms of communication, are yet to fathom how established parties and interest groups would allow the social media to flourish at the expense of heavy weight media corporations who have always reasserted their predominance. The social media tools appear to be an inadequate substitute for the traditional face-to-face political networking as alluded to by Putnam (2000).This has been challenging to the social media as an instrument of social cohesion as against the overtly ambitious disposition of the optimists who see social media as very essential for viable political relationships and a veritable platform for a bottom-up civic engagement. Another drawback of the social media is that it tends to be selective. Most Nigerians who live in rural areas, do not have access to social networking tools, and cannot participate effectively in internet mediated discussions.

The Nigerian Political Climate

The Nigerian political scene has provided avenues which make it easier to gauge the mood of key political stakeholders on the role of social media in a democracy. What is reassuring nevertheless is that an analysis of outcome gives a mixed reaction which is consistent with the earlier review in this paper. In a recent address by David Mark, Nigeria's Senate President titled, "Role of the Media and Good Governance in Nigeria", the speech was tainted with a lot of pessimism regarding a flagrant flourishing of the use of the social media. As a follow up, he called for a regime of censorship since according to him; social media do not have room for "rebuttal". His reservations are as follows: "...The emergence of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Blackberry messenger, YouTube etc have changed the face of media practice by making information sharing easier, faster and quicker. But this is not without its demerits. Social media has become a threat to the ethics of media practice and good governance because of its accessibility and absolute freedom. Every freedom carries a responsibility. Even in advanced democracies, where we all agree that good governance is practiced, there is no absolute freedom..."

A balance between the two opposing views was provided by Jibrin Ibrahim who is the Director, Center for Democracy and Development in Nigeria while addressing a conference May 2012 on the topic," New Media and Governance: Tools and Trends". His submission as captured below may not be surprising because of his civil society background. To him, "...New Media tends to cater for

society's trend towards limited sound bites and short attention spans. New Media often does not provide context analysis or a deeper understanding of issues. However, it has increased awareness in governance especially on the Federal Budget when figures of the President's food Budget were released..."

Take note that the New Media includes the social media.

To complement this, Jega (2012) highlighted the gains of social media in election administration in Nigeria to include transparency, swift feed backs for security intervention and above all civic mobilization of the youths for election. Prof. Jega, the incumbent chairman of the electoral commission in Nigeria who has been globally commended for conducting the 2011 general elections in Nigeria in a far better manner than the country had experienced since the disengagement of the Military from governance, attributed the internationally acclaimed improvement in election administration partly to the social media revolution. He was quick to add though, that the social media in Nigeria is fraught with the challenges of misinformation, illiteracy, narrowed scope etc.

Exploring the Social Media and Democratization Nexus

The enormity of the task of civic engagement, political participation vis a viz media access is gargantuan. This challenge is even more profound in newer democracies. Nigeria is not an exception. A unique feature in Nigeria's experience is that the Social media revolution gathered momentum almost at the same time and pace with the military disengagement from politics in the country. Statistics show that Nigeria has witnessed a phenomenal growth in online activities from 200,000 internet users in December, 2000 to over 73 million people maintaining on line presence in 2015. This figure towers above other countries within the continent -Egypt (17 million users), South Africa (5 million), Morocco (10.4 million users), and Algeria (4.7 million) (www.internetworldstarts.com/af/index)

It will not be out of place to conclude that Nigeria's renewed attempt at democracy was borne into the "Social Media era". This forms the basis for state and other non-state actors including, but not limited to the civil society to harness a critical mass of informed minds for social-political transformation and electoral integrity drive. This is more apt for Nigeria with a history of low level of transparency in the conduct of its affairs including elections. The apparent lack of transparency in electoral matters makes rigging, ballot box snatching, violence and other forms of corruption integral parts of the electoral process. This is a myth which the social media tools and its ancillaries bursted in the 2011 general elections in Nigeria. This position is further reechoed by civil society organizations including the National Democratic Institute in her final report on the elections thus:

More than in 2007, New Media played a prominent role in the elections. Access to internet and mobile phones were limited mainly to the urban centers, but still contributed to wider popular participation in elections. Nigerian youths in particular used blogs, social forums and online networking sites to disseminate information, discuss election related issues, and mobilize to vote and report results and incidents. Candidates and parties also launched significant outreach efforts through social media and used text messaging in their campaigns. Closer to

elections, INEC started updating its website more regularly and began using Twitter, Facebook, and SMS to gather information on the election process. (NDI: 2011:43).

Politicians are also keying into the increased use of the social media to reach potential voters. With the deepening of democratic norms, increased awareness and information dissemination, and the vast number of people that are becoming politically aware, there is this awareness that democracy is here to stay. People are becoming more interested in how their leaders are elected, unlike in the past. For instance, anecdotal evidence suggests that most people that will vote in the forthcoming election are going to do so with the intention to protect their votes, unlike in the past where people never bothered to vote, knowing that their votes would not count. They are of the opinion that politicians were able to rig the elections in the past simply because the populaces were indifferent to the democratic process.

Quite a number of views have been expressed on the correlation between the social media and democracy. (Norris, 2001) Norris identified three pertinent rhetorical postulates through which the social media can accentuate democratization. These are:

1. Knowing the type of (political) institutions moving online.
2. Assessing the functions of these political websites for maximizing transparent and interactive communication.
3. Explaining the rise of digital politics and in particular, the extent to which socio- economic, technological and political development drives these processes.

These positions are predicated on the notion that the social media revolution, to a large extent helps to broaden the political landscape through which digitalization of the conventional media platforms promotes an atmosphere where political stake holders can freely and spontaneously interact and the "pulse" of the citizenry felt or vice-versa to the extent that those institutions originally meant to act as gate keepers, who play an important role in the agenda setting and agenda building process can equally channel information about government back to the public. The greatest setback to this move in contemporary Nigeria is the paucity of multimedia content which unfortunately, necessitated a fall-back on the traditional media for content generation. The reason for this stems from the lack of ownership, accountability and the attendant lack of performance indices for measuring return on investment in this direction.

Challenges to Social Media Penetration in Nigeria

Press freedom, an inalienable component of any democracy or civil rule has been greatly threatened by successive military junta and even civilian governments in Nigeria (Jaja, 1993). The by-product of this is a civilian administration in 1999, under the then President Obasanjo, which curtailed information flow, to a very large extent. This accounts for his reluctance to pass the Freedom of Information bill, which was finally passed under President Jonathan in 2011.

The social media revolution at this point in time of Nigeria's political developments is almost a belated welcome relief. This is definitely in tune with the global trend where media pluralism and democratization have become the norm. It is activism which reality brings to our door step. According to Aliagan (2006), a plural media will create a sustainable democratic culture. The pervasive nature of poverty and illiteracy, in this part of the world has hampered the progress and restricted the growth of the social media pundits. Despite the impressive leap in the statistics of internet users in Nigeria between the year 2000 and 2012 and as a matter of fact by extension, domiciling 32% of the internet users in the entire African continent, (www.internetworldstarts.com/af/index) clearly illustrates the prospects for social media networking and its ancillaries as a veritable tool for socio political mobilization in Nigeria. This however, has not aided penetration. It is common knowledge that the distribution and the profile of users as illustrated above and as optimistic as it looks is skewed primarily to the economically advantaged class, particularly the youth within the country. This has debilitating effects on the utility of the social media as a tool for political mobilization especially in election administration. It equally re echoes Mohammed (2004), that New Media is a preserve of polities who are already rich in informational resource.

Social Media: A Revolutionary Tool for Democratic Consolidation
Three recent stories illustrate the important role social media is playing in political movements. Facebook and Twitter are transforming politics around the world, but to what effect? They helped dissidents drive dictators from power in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. No doubt they will continue to help subvert despotic regimes. Will they also foster democracy in newly liberated nations? Will they increase the leverage of activists pressing democratic governments to be more responsive to citizens' needs? Or will they be balkanizing forces, empowering competing constituencies and making it harder for old democracies to function and new democracies to take root?

Since the Arab Spring, protesters have used communications technology to organize massive demonstrations against government policies in Spain, Greece, Israel and India. Their targets were not dictators but elected officials they saw as corrupt or indifferent to the interests of most people in those countries. Some observers regard these events as signs of a new, more enlightened era of global politics. Indeed, it is tempting to agree with a recent *Forbes* cover story on the power of social media that the "world is becoming more democratic and reflective of the will of ordinary people." Unfortunately, there is good reason to be skeptical. For one thing, the road from the ouster of an autocrat to a stable democracy is long and treacherous, and many revolutions have resulted in regimes as oppressive as the ones overthrown. The French Revolution, of course, is a dramatic case in point. Notable examples from the twentieth century include the insurrections that brought down Russia's Czar Nicholas II and the Shah of Iran. The participants in the recent Facebook-assisted revolutions in North Africa have been ideologically diverse, including religious fundamentalists opposed to the creation of secular democracies. In the struggles to reshape those political systems, it is anything but certain the democrats will prevail.

Moreover, the effectiveness of social media as political weapons has been due to their ability to marshal the support of large numbers of people for specific goals, such as toppling a tyrant or electing a candidate. (Although the technology-aided Occupy Wall Street protests are spreading to other cities, tapping a wellspring of anger at "corporate greed," their lack of clear objectives clouds their likely "success.") It remains to be seen how social media can be used to enlist popular support for policies vital to a nation's common good but which would impose costs on politically powerful segments of the population.

In a democracy, social media not only enable advocates of a political agenda to organize like-minded voters more quickly and efficiently, but they also allow these people to form an ongoing bloc actively pursuing that agenda. Utilizing online tools, this group can easily and cheaply promote its cause to potential recruits. The larger it becomes and the more money it raises for lobbying and electing candidates pledged to its agenda, the greater its ability to influence elections and policy-making. The seamless reach provided by new media in a democracy and its attendant power of mobilization, opinion formation and more specifically, civic engagement is more pronounced in electioneering campaigns. Leading the pack is President Barack Obama, of the United States of America en route his Presidential election victory of

2008, used the internet effectively to his advantage, particularly in the area of fundraising towards winning the presidential election, where he was reported to have raised a whooping sum of thirty-two million USD in January 2008 from over two hundred and fifty thousand contributors (techcrunch.com).

Closer home, President Goodluck Jonathan was able to access a sizeable chunk of the Nigerian voting public on the social media, Facebook, which culminated in his publishing of two books; "My Friends and I" and "Bring Back the Book" detailing the feedbacks he garnered during the electioneering campaigns of 2011 and stressing the need to re-ignite the dwindling reading culture among Nigerians and particularly the youths who form the bastion of Facebook users. At the other end, it is apt to add that the same social media platforms used by these leaders can be used for dishing out constructive criticisms and sometimes disparaging accusations against policy directives of government. A case in point was the fuel subsidy removal protests of January 2012 in Nigeria and government's eventual shift of ground by reversing pump price to sixty seven naira can be attributed partly to the enormity of pressure mounted through the social media, Facebook, Twitter et al on government and more importantly, the effect of the various social media anchored on the internet in the sustenance of the protests for more than a week. This was unprecedented in the annals of civil right protests in Nigeria (Amaefule: 2012, Jaja 1995).

The social media has also been used to draw international attention to some occurrences in Nigeria. On the night of April 14, 2014, 276 girls were kidnapped from their school dormitory, in Chibok, Borno state, by members of the BokoHaram sect. The Bring Back Our Girls hashtag (#BBOG), which went viral on all social media platforms worldwide, attracted worldwide attention to the insurgency in the North- East region of Nigeria. Although the girls haven't been found yet, at the moment, there is a coalition of forces from different countries

whose mission is to liberate the North East from terror, and if possible, find the girls and re-unite them with their families.

The social Media was a wakeup call for political leadership at all levels to respond albeit reluctantly before the situation escalates further, while also preempting the events especially in the western part of the country from snow-balling into what has now been dubbed " Arab spring" where social media platforms singularly became a rallying point for mass mobilization (social capital.wordpress.com). International relations and national identities are two broad areas where developing countries have been impacted by new media technologies. Nigeria and other developing polities do not have the same amount of access to informational resources required to combat global inequalities. These challenges are better highlighted in (Ijoumas and Suprenant: 1987, Shaheed 2004) in their words: "...These issues of representation and self presentations have been of particular significance to small developing states that are trying to compete for attention in cyberspace forms part of the ongoing struggle of many developing countries to combat global inequalities..."

Political players exert their power continually -- not just during campaigns -- by carefully monitoring the votes and other political activities of the candidates they back and immediately relaying that information (with commentary) to their members. Its leaders can make sure "their" elected officials are fully aware of this oversight and that those representatives will be "held accountable" if they deviate from their campaign promises. The social media is a tool of liberation and empowerment. That may seem fairly audacious when a good portion of the Western world is using Facebook and Twitter to post pictures of what they had for dinner or take quizzes on what TV character they may be. But the freedom to communicate openly and honestly is not something to be taken for granted. In countries where traditional media is a tool of control, these new and truly social channels have the power to radically alter our world.

Social media is one of the most important global leaps forward in recent human history. It provides for self-expression and promotes mutual understanding. It enables rapid formation of networks and demonstrates our common humanity across cultural differences. It connects people, their ideas and values, like never before. From mobilizing young Nigerian voters, to the roots of the Arab Spring in the Middle East, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and others have played not just an important role, but also an instrumental one. This is the reason why some governments have expressed fear about truly empowering their citizens through these new technologies. In China, the government of President Xi Jinping has expressed concern about the real power that social media has to spread information. Hundreds of bloggers across the country have been detained and intimidation tactics have ramped up. Microbloggers have been threatened with three years' jail time for posting "false" information that is viewed at least 5,000 times. Will government "management" of social media reduce it to a modern version of state-controlled media?

The chilling effect is palpable -- driving some underground and forcing others to seek different avenues to communicate. What the government fails to realize is that people will not stop communicating; they will always find new ways to do so.

The power of truth and the reach of social networks can be a threatening combination for those with something to hide. The power of human connections online forming communities is remarkable. They are self-monitoring, with their own norms and expectations. Forward-thinking governments will listen to those voices and empower them. Others will be fearful of the voice of the people and remain on the losing side of history.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The complementary role which the social media has come to play alongside the conventional media like radio, television and newsprints magazines, cannot be over-emphasized. Nigeria as a member of the global community must urgently latch on to the opportunity of a continuous, seamless interaction between governments at different levels in the federal structure and governments and the citizenry at the other end for a mutually rewarding civil engagement which is a hall mark of democracy and civil rule. However, there is the need to formulate strict and strong professional, ethical and accountability principles as well as the need to provide support through trainings and professional resources to stem the tide against using the online media to promote hate speech and other unethical tendencies.

In a dialogue with online publishers, facilitated by the UNDP which took place on the 10th of February, 2015, Dapo Olorunyomi(Publisher of Premium Times), however pointed out the challenges that have come with the growing influence of social media, especially in the absence of a common set of ethics that should guide online social media users and the power to produce content which now lies in the hands of individuals and not media houses as before.

He asked the following cogent questions. What degree of responsibility or norms will be in demand from a platform of delivery that is based on social media? With the advent of the citizen journalists as news gatherers, how do we take care of critical concerns about sourcing, authenticity, and above all, fairness? What happens to verification in the wake of the now relaxed editing standards that come with the digital age via social media and Twitter in particular? It should be of note that there is the growing tendency by online publishers to promote hate speech. Emphasis should be placed on ethical, credible and fair reporting. Media laws must be reviewed carefully in such a manner that would not portray Nigerian government as being authoritarian while checkmating abuses by New Media adherents in the country to forestall its use for the promotion of terrorism and other malady against government and amongst the citizenry. These can be achieved by a review of existing media regulatory framework for New Media access, content generation and standardization in Nigeria.

These we hope would be addressed as quickly as possible to enable this vital sector continue to contribute in the development of the nation and particularly in the deepening of the demoralization process of Nigeria.

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