

Social media and Citizen Journalism as tools for social mobilization and engagement among Nigerian Youths

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Abstract

Access to media platforms is a critical key for ensuring citizen participation in societal development. And how far citizens participate in the development of their societies is determined by how much access they have to available media. With social media, citizens have become journalists, and this new found role gives citizens the power to dictate and influence social discussion. This article explores how Nigerian youths have used social media and citizen journalism to organize and execute protests and social agitations in recent years. The article equally made useful recommendations on to better harness the possibilities of social media and citizen journalism to achieve positive change in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Social media; Citizen Journalism, Youth Engagement, youth Mobilization*

1.0. Introduction

One basic characteristic of humans is the desire to communicate. This desire overrides natural and artificial barriers. Hence, it is commonplace to see people who speak different languages have a wordless conversation. This is because the desire to communicate and express opinions or pass information among humans cannot be completely caged or hindered no matter the barriers. It is this natural desire that has led to the invention of various media for human communication across centuries. These different media, tools, and technologies were all invented to enhance human communication.

Right from the era of clay tablets to this era of electronic tablets human communication has been greatly advanced for the development of society. With technological development comes a new generation of social Internet-based IT applications commonly referred to as social media. These social applications empower users to create and share information very easily with the aid of technological tools. Social media has been accepted and adopted as a communication tool that allows peer-to-peer communication over distance with the aid of web based technologies. These Web-based communication technologies have merged during the past couple of years to cause a significant change that has altered the way people communicate (Turkle, 2008, Connaway and Fanie, 2014).

The fall out of this merger of technologies in human communication gave birth to the social media revolution, which in itself is an advancement of web 2.0 and a creative way of using of existing technologies. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”.

Many studies have shown social media to be a type of word-of-mouth that enhances communication with large numbers of people – be it organization to consumers or consumer to consumers (Sago, 2013). In fact, the ‘social’ in the social media is the ability of social media to facilitate interactions that cut across different topics using different formats ranging from text, pictures, to videos. Young and Rossman (2015) had earlier

noted that using social media for communication can “transform communication from personality-devoid one-way broadcasting to personality-rich two-way interacting”. Herein lies the power of social media because it provides room for everyone to talk: literate or illiterate, popular or obscure. The key benefit of this is the richness of the communication and the ability to hear from all sides. Though this could have its downsides, it has been proven to be more beneficial especially with the need to amplify issues that concern everyone.

In Nigeria, social media has been engaged for several reasons by different classes of people. And for most Nigerians, social media is the only platform where they can have the opportunity to contribute to national discuss or air their views on matters of concern to them. And with the increasing gagging of the traditional media through the overbearing regulatory activities of the National Broadcasting Cooperation (NBC), social media walls have become the only protected enclaves and spaces where citizens can vent displeasure at poor governance and mismanagement of resources.

With regards to the strict regulation of the traditional media, Ihechu and okugo (2013) asserted that the NBC “...serves as an agent of government thereby beclouding its agenda of pluralism in the broadcast sector”. This has necessitated the increased use of social media for citizen journalism and social engagements. Even the use of social media has faced stiff opposition in recent times as evidenced by the various attempts to enact social media laws (Iredia, 2021) or with the suspension of Twitter in Nigeria (Okafor, 2021). It should be noted that, the liberalized access social media afford has allowed citizens to find ways around the various stiff government regulations to continue to use social media for engagement, protest and social mobilizations.

All though social media use has been largely for social interactions and connections, it has also proven to be equally a critical tool for other purposes for many Nigerian youths who may never have access to the mainstream media. For example, some have used it for educational purposes, while others have used it for political campaigns. Strikingly, in the year 2020, social media and Twitter specifically, became a tool for citizen mobilization for

protests and demand for social justice. Many studies such as Ekoh and George (2021) and Dark (2020) have reported how Twitter was used for mobilizing youths across Nigeria during the EndSARS protest in Nigeria. The events of the EndSARS protests have sparked discussions about the power of the social media in Nigeria.

At the core of the discussions is the level of citizen participation in news generation and distribution, otherwise referred to as citizen journalism. Citizen journalism has peaked in the era of social media. This is because of the liberal access the masses now have to media platforms unlike the past where they had no access to the mainstream media platforms. Today, a young boy in a faraway corner of Nigeria can literally spark a national debate just by merely reporting a social ill with his phone. And even traditional media now scurry social media platforms to gather news for their audiences.

The point that needs to be further clarified is the extent social media is used by Nigerian youths for citizen journalism, and social activities. There is also a need to draw out both the benefits and issues of concerns with the use of social media by Nigerian youths. This paper is, therefore, focused on drawing the connection that exist between social media and citizen journalism one hand, and social protests and engagement on the other hand.

2.0. Concept of Social media and social media use among Nigerian youths

Social media is considered generally as technology enabled media that allows interaction on an instant basis. The ‘social’ in social media is its ability to allow group interaction, integration and mobilization. Solis (2007), made this point by noting that social media is the “fusion of sociology and technology, transforming monologue (one-to-many) into dialogue (many-to-many)”. Herein lies both the character and power of the social media as an emerging media especially in climes with over regulated mainstream media. In fact, social media itself is still evolving with new possibilities been added on a regular basis.

In looking at the concept and characteristics of social media, Bruns (2015), postulated that “all media are social, but only a particular subset of all media are fundamentally defined by their sociality, and thus distinguished (for example) from the mainstream media of print, radio, and television. Such distinctions are commonly derived from the technological and structural traits of these media”. These traits include but not limited to: they are operating on a networked, many-to many rather than a broadcast, one-to-many basis; they are demotic rather than elite, with the means of media production in the hands of the people rather than concentrated in a few commercial and/or public service organizations; and they are largely free from editorial control or censorship, rather than operating gate-keeping regimes of one form or another. These characteristics capture significantly the distinction between social media and other media.

Since its popularization as a separate concept from web 2.0 around 2005 several studies have been done in different contexts such as the stock market, parliamentary and presidential elections, emergency events, education, library and so on (Evangelopoulos, Magro, & Si-dorova, 2012; Lacka & Chong, 2015; Quadri & Idowu, 2016). The most notable aspect of the social media is the social networking sites because they basically connect millions of people all over the world. And this connection is a major source of power for the ordinary citizen whose voice may never be heard under the traditional set up of societies. Adaja and Ayodele (2013) supported this when they noted that “One of the breakthroughs in ICTs in the 21st century was the discovery and emergence of the new media which have facilitated the creation of the different platforms for social interaction”.

Social media are diverse in nature and targeted towards achieving different objectives. While some are mainly for interacting and connecting with people, others are for information sharing while others are targeted at broadcasting news. At the base of all the types of social media, is the advantage of connectivity and interactivity. Whether it is to share information, share a video or a picture, the edge of the social media is that everyone can share and everyone can have access to what is shared. The use of social media cuts across different groups and aspects of the society, however, it has been established that each group use social media differently.

Among Nigerian youths social media has been adopted and used for several purposes. Whether it is for person to person conversation, or group connections, social media has liberated the communication space for the average Nigerian youth. In 2015, Mbanaso, Dandaura, Ezeh and Iwuchukwu studied the use of social media by Nigerian youths. The findings showed a sharp growth in social media with over 90% using social media actively, and only 0.7% among youths who have access to social media platforms were found not to use social media at least once a week. This statistics has now greatly changed especially during the lockdowns forced by COVID-19 pandemic.

Increasing number of youths in urban and rural areas are coming to the reality of social media freedoms. This has led to increase in participation in national and local discourse by youths who hitherto were silent on important issues. In view of this, Nzewi (2021) reported that “today’s Nigeria Youths spend hours surfing the net, engaging themselves in chatting and socializing on different social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram etc.” This reiterates previous studies that found that youths see social media as a major part of their lives, and as a place for building life supporting social connections (Singh, 2017).

The issue is no longer whether Nigerians youths use social media or how often they use it but what they use it for. And studies have shown that social media has been used by youths for various purposes.

3.0. Citizen journalism in Nigeria

Some decades ago the journalist means one thing and one thing only – that is, those who have been professionally trained to report and publish news. So as Anorue, Obayi, and Chima, (2013) pointed out “over the years, journalism practice has been squarely the preserve of professionals in the field of journalism”. However, the rise in the use of social media brought with it new ways of generating and casting news. The most striking is the level of involvement of citizens in the news circulation process. This participation of citizens in journalism is simply referred to as citizen journalism. Citizen journalism is a

distinct form of journalism where untrained citizens carry out the basic duties of journalists such as news reporting using unconventional platforms and tools.

Whereas traditional journalism is organized and regulated, citizen journalism is a liberal all comers zone. Apeh and Didiugwu (2017) asserted that “the concept of citizen journalism has been variously called "public", "participatory", "democratic", "guerrilla” or "street" journalism”. Citizen journalism is the opposite of the traditional, one way, almost rigid and always regulated nature of the mainstream media.

Depending on the environment, citizen journalism sometimes comes with some level of doubts, misjudgment, and misrepresentation especially on the part of regulatory authorities, who see it as too fluid to be controlled. Their views notwithstanding, citizen journalism remains a powerful type of journalism that allows the creation of user-generated contents, which is sometimes unedited, without censorship, and can be distributed in real-time. With social media, citizens have a platform to be informed about important issues, as well as get empowered to get involved in the creation of news contents, which sometimes maybe grabbed by even the conventional media (Apeh & Didiugwu 2017).

There are several occasions where citizens break major news about important events and personalities. Apuke (2019) reported that some of the notable instances of citizens breaking major news globally include “the 2010 Haiti earthquake, the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement, the 2013 protests in Turkey, the Euromaidan events in Ukraine, and Syrian Civil War and the 2014 Ferguson unrest”. In fact, people look forward to reading the posts of certain individuals because of their richness in credible news. Such individuals, though not professional journalists, have become citizen journalist who serve news to the people on social media platforms. As earlier noted, citizen journalism is uncensored, hence it allows for the delivery of news in its raw form from citizens to citizens. Perhaps one of the advantages of citizen journalism is its ability to gain the trust of ordinary citizens who have grown wary of the amount of censorship and regulation that follows news from conventional media.

In Nigeria, citizen journalism gained steam through the activities of many social activists who in a bid to confront political system began to publish investigative reports on social media. Apeh and Didiugwu (2017) earlier reported how Sahara reporters became the foremost citizen journalists' enclave online. Sahara reporters is a citizen journalist forum that became a major news source for most Nigerians especially when the topic is politics and political leadership in Nigeria. As Apuke (2019) concluded "it is clear ... that citizen journalism is growing rapidly in Nigeria, but certain things have to be put in place such as the citizen being sure of what to disseminate to the public" Furthermore, Okoro, Diri, and Odii (2013) asserted that with "its interactivity and ability to deliver news in split seconds, citizen journalism has posed a serious challenge to the mainstream media in Nigeria".

Citizen journalism in Nigeria has risen to a level that even traditional media has found ways to incorporate reports from citizens in to the mainstream. For example, some of the main stream media now have what they refer to as eyes witness reports or amateur reports. They use these reports to buttress or provide evidence for most of the breaking news. It is safe to say that the average Nigerian citizen has come to realize how much power they wield through the use of social media platforms for reporting daily accounts of activities around them. And the extent they positively engage this platforms has remarkable consequences on socio-political issues and matters of everyday life.

4.0. Use of social media and citizen journalism for protests and social engagement by Nigerian Youths

Many media theories and models have been advanced over the years to explain how the media affect its audiences and the society generally. For example, the Hypodermic needle theory was advanced to explain the direct impact messages have on its audiences. The hypodermic needle theory which was advanced many decades ago seems to become quite relevant in explaining the power social media messages have on its audiences today.

Whether it is the EndSARS protest or the various conspiracies that were peddled in the wake of the corona virus pandemic, it is becoming obvious how most Nigerian citizens receive and take action on social media messages. For most Nigerians on social media, there is no form of filter applied to social media messages. Though this has positive implications for social integration, and engagement, it equally has adverse effects that could undermine the gains of social media and citizen journalism.

Despite this, social media has become a form of virtual word of mouth, and public space for all citizens to have their say in crucial matters. Just like the Public Sphere Theory postulated, social media has become a public gathering place for all people especially the youth who over the years have been looking for avenues to express themselves freely. In its basic set up, the public sphere is “made up of people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas, 1991:176). As Apeh and Didiugwu (2017), further noted “the public sphere is a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space”.

The idea of the public sphere is that it is a place for people to converge and make input into societal issues that affect them in view of influencing those who have power to change their circumstances either through persuasion or by agitation. In line with this, over the past couple of years Nigerian youths have used social media as a platform for venting displeasure at the mismanagement of the resources of the country by the political elites. Other issues bordering on social justice and the unfair treatment of the youths by different

law enforcement agencies have also found space in the Nigerian social media space. All these serve as evidences of citizen journalism in Nigeria.

It has been variously reported that citizen journalism has gained roots in Nigeria mainly due to the active participation of Nigerian youths on social media platforms. All these have been going on and considered almost normal by the general populace and even the not-so-friendly government agencies until the events that heralded the Nigerian EndSARS protest.

The EndSARS protest was a protest against police brutality in Nigeria. SARS itself was a unit in the Nigerian police whose mission was to combat crimes, robbery and kidnapping. But it soon deviated from its mandate and began to act as an agent of oppression of the youths. The height of its impunity was the indiscriminate killing of those youths who fail to cooperate with some of the corrupt officers in that unit especially those who refused to pay “cash for release” after “capture”.

The EndSARS protest was eventually sparked as Ekoh, P.C., George, E.O. (2021) reported, with “the sharing of a video of the Special Anti-Robbery Squared (known as SARS) officials killing a man on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, led to widespread protests across Nigeria”. Ordinarily, mobilizing Nigerians for a national protest would have been nearly impossible but that video had so much mass power that spontaneous and unregulated protests broke out across the country demanding for the disbandment of SARS.

Furthermore, Dark (2020) added that for two weeks leading to October 20th, 2020, “thousands of young people across Nigeria and abroad took to the streets to call for the dissolution of Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)”. The effectiveness and widespread nature of the protests is an acknowledgement that Nigerians use Twitter and other social media for activism and for addressing social issues that were previously under reported and suppressed by the over regulated mainstream media. Malefakis (2021) asserted that “these

protests in Nigeria against SARS demonstrate how social media can be galvanised as a tool to challenge established norms and demand for societal change”.

Using social media, which is accessible to many youths, made the EndSARS protest one of the most engaging youth-led agitation in Nigerian history. In fact, the movement had no known leader yet with social media, arrangements were made, funds were raised, and the schedules of protests were kept. At Lekki Toll Gate for example, Twitter was utilized on daily basis to map out points of meetings and the various activities for the day. With social media and citizen journalists, government’s efforts to suppress the news and blank out vital details of the unfolding events were countered with eye witness facts and real time data.

5.0. Benefits of social media use for protests and social engagement

In general, the benefits of social media use for protests and social engagements far outweighs the often publicized weaknesses of the social media. The use of social media for social engagement and mobilization for protest has proven to be very effective. Whether it is in America where it is has been used to demand for social justice and equality, or in Nigeria where social media helped galvanized the youths during the EndSARS protest, social media has proven to be a veritable source of power for the ordinary masses. Some of the outstanding benefits of social media use for protest and social mobilization include:

- **Unrestricted access to media:** normally access to media platforms in Nigeria is an exclusive preserve of the high and mighty. This closes the door on young people who have something to say but have no means to gain media attention. But with social media, access to media has become liberalized. Hence, youths have now receive media power without haven to have some level of economic power.
- **Low cost of access to a media:** access to social media comes almost at no cost except the cost of data. So, with data on the phone, a youth already has access to social media. And with increase in internet penetration in Nigeria, many youths have

almost unhindered 24 hours access to social media at a cost that makes access possible for all categories of youths irrespective of their economic status.

- Quick and direct mode of mobilization: social media affords the youths an instant and quick media for sparking spontaneous mass action. With the use of multimedia such as video, sound and pictures, the youths can incite or instigate mass action against injustices and social ills. This has helped to shorten the time it takes to convince and mobilize youths for action in Nigeria.

6.0. Recommendations for consideration

Whereas the benefits of social media use by youths far outweighs the actual and perceived dangers, nevertheless, there is need to pay keen attention to the excesses and likely abuses. If not checked, social media could go so bad to the point that close monitoring and censorship will become a necessity thereby defeating the peculiar edge social media has. The three (3) key recommendations from this study focus on the issues of: responsibility; Access; and Misinformation.

- The liberal nature of social media often makes social media users feel that everything they post or say online has no consequence or repercussions for them. It is in view of this that there is need to promote the idea of social responsibility among youths. The youths should be enlightened to appreciate the consequence of their media activities on them as individuals and on the society. The ideals of Social responsibility theory in mass communication should be applied in this regard. According to Apuke (2019) “the theory advocates that the media is free to publish, but should be mindful of what to publish”. This means that those behind any form of media should strive to be socially responsible in whatever they disseminate to the public. This will ensure that social media outlets do not become platforms for stirring up violence, as well not become places for spreading biased and unbalanced reports.
- Access to social media platforms remains restricted for certain categories of people due to their physical or social location. Although internet penetration is growing fast

in Nigeria, at 101 million in a country of 200 million people, a lot still needs to be done especially in rural areas where internet access remains problematic.

- Misinformation remains a major challenge in Nigeria especially due to the low information literacy rate in Nigeria. It is common place to see people share information even without reading through let alone assessing its authenticity. Mischief makers have taken advantage of this to broadcast entirely false reports or doctored reports to spark preconceived reactions among Nigerians. In the height of the COVID-19 pandemic for example, Aiyebilehin and Mesagan (2021) reported that “many individuals from developed and developing nations alike deliberately used the instrument of the internet to spin false news and disseminate fake information regarding the Corona virus (COVID-19). And with fear and anxiety, many people especially in developing nations received and utilized such information”. It is important that while the youth rightly resist social media censorship, there is need to promote information literacy among youths.

7.0. Conclusion

This paper clearly reported empirical cases that demonstrates the immense power of the social media in helping Nigerian youths have their say on national issues as well as express their grievances towards social ill and oppression. In this 21st century and with increase in internet penetration, the media limitations that comes with the mainstream media have been largely lifted, and the access to media has been liberalized. While this comes with many benefits, it also has issues of concerns which should be carefully considered and addressed. Part of these issues are the proliferation of fake news through social media, and unethical use of Social media due to its liberal nature. In all, the benefits of social media use by Nigerian youth especially for protests and social engagement far outweigh the perceived and actual demerits.

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