

Communication and Social Media Use in Nigeria: Order or Ordered Disorder?

Ben U. Nwanne

Abstract

This paper addresses the pervasive influence of the social media. While admitting the numerous advantages of social media platforms, the paper points out the many abuses to which the social media have been subjected. Indeed, under the “cover” of various social media networks, some persons many have deceived many by presenting themselves for what they are not. Many have fallen victims to the evil schemes of criminally-minded ‘Facebookers’, ‘Twitterians’ and users of other networks. Many of the criminals have gone away without apprehension due to the non-existence or ineffectiveness of cyber policing. Published materials provided data for this study. Findings from the study suggest a weak mechanism of cyber policing with a high degree of inadequate and/or fraudulent messages which have the tendency to deceive or hoodwink unsuspecting users of the social networks. Findings also indicate a preponderance of users of social media in Nigeria and across the world who depend on the networks for authentic information and social stability as many feel they would be ‘cut off’ if they were not hooked to any of the social networks. Indeed, it is a sign of upward social mobility to be connected to any of the networks. In order to fully access the benefits of the social media network, it is recommended that the service providers should device appropriate mechanisms of preventing and managing cyber crimes.

KeyWords: *.Communication .Social media .Cyber Crime .Cyber Policing and Society.*

INTRODUCTION

Without a shred of doubt, the internet is perhaps the most important communication breakthrough since the emergence of mankind on earth millions of years ago, if historians and paleontologists are to be believed. The piece of technology, for all intents and purposes, has revolutionized communication in ways previously thought impossible. In education and learning, the internet has been amazingly successful in providing prodigious information in practically all aspects of learning.

At the click of a bottom, Google and other search engines could produce tons of information with a high level of speed and accuracy. It is not therefore, surprising that many educational institutions now have e-libraries with almost unimaginable volumes of information.

Besides its contribution to the academic world, the internet has made a triumphant entry on the social circuit, hence the availability and pervasiveness of the social media including, but not limited, to Facebook, Twitter and others.

Those social platforms have provided opportunities for social interactions with millions of subscribers in different parts of the world. This promotes the concept of globalization which is a buzzword in many academic disciplines and professions. Put differently, it has put smiles on the faces of many who have found joy or satisfaction through the contacts on the social media platforms.

But that is not the entire story. The other side of the coin is that many have found deep agony through exposure to the social media. Many have even lost their lives in the

process. This may suggest that the internet service providers have probably not taken adequate measures in cyber policing or managing their various social platforms. Indeed, the problem is acquiring a life of its own, becoming a social problem with the passing of each day as more and more persons fall victims. It is probably in this light that some hotels in Europe have started using a device that would deactivate internet access, according a news report on the CNN main news on June 25, 2015. The respected medium indicated that more institutions are considering the option.

Given the spread and intensity of the problems associated with the internet and the social network, the researcher is tempted to ask the inevitable question: Communication and Social Media in Nigeria: order or Ordered disorder?

Definition of Terms

In order to make this presentation more comprehensible, some key words such as cyber crime, cyber policing and society will be defined.

Society: According to Imhonopi and Urim (2004, p.149) "a society is a group of people who live in a particular territory, are subject to a common system of political authority and share a common culture". The authors further assert that "shared norms and values are essential for the operation of human society". It should be noted, however, that values and norms change over time, hence society is said to be dynamic.

No matter the situation, human beings will be organized in societies. In the process socialization will continuously take place to prepare new members to be effective members of the society. This is in line with the postulates of Croteau and Haynes (2000, p.14) that:

Through the socialization process we also learn to perform our social roles as friend, student, worker, citizen and so forth, the process of socialization continues throughout life, but it is especially influential for children and adolescents.

Cyber Crime: These are crimes committed electronically through the internet, where physical content might not be necessary. It suggests the abuse of technology for personal gains. This is, no doubts, one of the dysfunctions of technology. This is evident in e-banking where many clients have been defrauded. Even on Facebook and other social media, criminals using false identities, have lured people to heavy financial losses or even death.

Cyber Policing: Cyber policing seems to be in its incipient stages suggesting a low level of internet savvy and access even among security agencies. Taking together, cyber policing, would mean all the efforts by security agencies and other stakeholders in protecting the lives and properties of the users of various social media.

Theoretical Framework

The Uses and Gratification theory provides a firm theoretical framework for discussing communication and social media use in Nigeria. According to Fiske (1982, p.135), "this approach takes as its basis the belief that the audience has a complex set of needs which it seeks to satisfy...." One of such avenues is through media use as well as other means.

In developing the uses and gratification theory, explain Infante, Rancer and Womack (1997) communication theorists had three objectives: (i) they hoped to explain how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs. They attempted to answer the question 'what do people do with the media' (Rubin, 1985) (ii) A second objective was to discover the underlying motives for individuals media use ... (iii) A third objective of this line of theory building was to identify the positive and negative consequences of individual media use..."

The development of this theory appropriately focuses on the consumers of media products as against the producers, which had been the focus of intense study over decades, and perhaps centuries. This approach which deals with the consumer, is relevant because production is only important to the extent that consumption is assured. This marketing perspective produces a win-win situation for both the media producer and the consumer. If media content producers understand and appreciate the tastes and motivation of the consumer, production will be better focused and targeted. It is therefore appropriate for a study that deals with social media use in Nigeria.

Data Gathering Approach

Given the contemporary nature of the topic and being a review, the author depended largely on qualitative approach such as analyzing newspaper and journal articles as well as textbooks (Berger, 2000). Essentially, the author also used unobtrusive observation to gain a glean of what is probably happening on the social media scene in Nigeria. In some way, the author is also a member of the 'group' of social media users, hence a participant observer. As Priest (1996) as noted, "The key to participant observation is to become a regular member of a group under study. The researcher's own feelings, reactions and mistakes provide important data".

Nigerians and Social Media

The industrial revolution in Europe was one of the most remarkable developments of mankind. That revolution led to the availability of many vital products and services at reasonable prices which meant more comfort for mankind. Similarly, the emergence of social media is quite revolutionary as regards the quantum and quality of communication it has engendered. Although, many of the social media are now in operation, the emergence of **Facebook** in 2004 marked a turning point in the social media business and history. Founded by Mark Zuckerberg, a former Harvard University undergraduate, the social media industry has grown phenomenally on account of its interactional and widespread uses.

Like citizens of other countries, Nigerians, especially youths, have reacted enthusiastically to **Facebook** and other social media. Many of them spend disproportionate time on-line pursuing the object of their interest.

Functions of the Social Media

No doubt, many acknowledge the functions of the social media in the academic, entertainment and social spheres of society. Perhaps its greatest strength is the potential for change. In this segment, focus is on the functions of the social media in Nigeria's developmental effort.

- i. **Keeping connected:** In today's world, networking is of crucial importance because no one can really succeed all alone (Nwanne, 2015). Social media provide an avenue for people to exchange ideas and information for social, commercial, political or other reasons.
- ii. **Economic Activities:** As Ochonogor, Ohiagu and Nwammuo (2015, p. 1) have noted "they bring people together to exchange ideas and business opportunities". Indeed, social media have facilitated legitimate and profitable businesses among persons not physically together.
- iii. **Political Campaigns:** Reconnecting relative, friends and associates who for reasons outside their control had lost contact, social media have been used for political campaigns in the 2011 presidential campaigns when Goodluck Jonathan was the presidential candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria, He had million of followers on the social networks which partly accounted for his victory of that year. In 2015, however, he could not re-enact the 'magic' hence losing to former military ruler, Mohammadu Buhari of the rival All Progressive Congress (APC).

- iv. One of the advantages of the social media has been their quick and efficient dissemination of news as 'Facebookers' and users of other networks easily share information among themselves. For an information-hungry world, this must be a wonderful advantage indeed.
- v. **Job search:** In developing countries, the problem of unemployment has great economic and social consequences. There are many sites where job vacancies are advertised. Indeed many job seekers have availed themselves of such opportunities, thereby reducing the scourge of unemployment. And also, those who have made job switches got such opportunities through timely information dissemination which social media platforms provide.

Drawbacks of Social Media

It is often said, with justification, that there are two sides of a coin. As far as social media are concerned, there are certain social ills often associated with their operation. Some of them are identified and discoursed in this segment.

- i **Identity theft:** Perhaps the biggest worry associated with the use of the social media is the question of identity theft. Many with dubious and criminal intentions often claim to be who they are not many not. Some, not so-good-looking ladies have used other peoples' pictures as themselves. Imagine the disappointment of meeting a lady on a social media platform who has used someone else's photographs as hers. This situation provides cover for different unethical and criminal activities often perpetrated by such persons. This is well documented in news paper reports. On June 12, 2015 *The Punch* reported that "facebook hosts 50 fake accounts of Aisha Buhari" According to the story:

Less than one month into the current administration, the family of President Muhammadu Buhari is already faced with online identity theft. For one, the wife of the president, Aisha Buhari, is associated with at least 50 accounts on facebook while the majority of the pages go with her image on their profiles, a few others are run without photographs. Sadly, thousands of unwary social media subscribers have been relating with 'the first lady' on the fake profiles.

Those who invented the social media probably did not anticipate the 'tears' that their invention would cause many. The activities of fraudsters do not seem to be a respecter of persons and former presidents Olusegun Obasanjo and Dr Goodluck Jonathan have at different times been victims of hackers who do not care about the effect of their activities so long as they are beneficiaries.

- ii **Costs:** Despite the social, economic, political advantages of using the social media, many would easily admit that the negative, some say unrestrained expenditure on social media is a distraction to economic productivity. Many, including the employed, spend much money and valuable hours surfing the net, achieving little or no productive outcome. So doing, many man hours are lost to the national economy. Workers lose hours to the social media. Students, under the guise of searching for valuable academic materials for their studies, spend hours on the net, at times, to no avail.
- iii **Pornography:** Social media platforms have provided veritable opportunities for adults and young persons to explore and exploit pornography for their own gratification. This has led to a degradation of our moral values to the extent that obvious sexuality appears to be the norm, many have also been influenced by the situation to embrace sexual crimes such as adultery and rape.
- iv. **Murder:** Perhaps the most worrisome consequence of the misuse of the various social media platforms has been the criminal 'appropriation' of the social media. Some users of the social media, despite being hardened criminals, put on the 'sheep's clothing'. They pretend to be what they are not and lure many to their early graves or

make them lose their life's savings, or both. In July 2012, a gory incident occurred when a young lady, Cynthia Osokogu, the daughter of an army general, was lured from Jos to Lagos by her facebook 'friends' on the invitation for a business deal. The young lady never returned alive as her hosts murdered her in a FESTAC Lagos hotel. Ochonogor *et al* (2015) also recall another gory incident in Port Harcourt, Rivers State Nigeria.

Government and Social Media: It is the responsibility of government to show a healthy interest in any issue that affects the people. Indeed, the social contract between the government and the governed suggests that the former should provide security and an enabling environment for the latter to survive and flourish. However, many governments of the developing world are usually unable or unwilling to provide adequate facilities and generally provide good governance because of selfishness and a consuming desire for primitive acquisition and consumption. At the moment, there is a Social Media Bill before the National Assembly. Initial reactions to the bill suggest it is neither in the interest of the media nor the people. Indeed, many laws enacted in Nigeria are often crafted to favour the ruling class and their cronies. Quite often, the comments, observations and, even protests, of the citizens are often studiously ignored. This appears to be the case with the Social Media Bill before the National Assembly. Although details of the Bill have only been scantily reported in the press, the reactions of principal officers of the Senate tend to suggest a personal/hidden agenda. However, in an attempt to gauge public opinion on the Bill, **New Telegraph** in its December II, 2015 edition interviewed three respondents. The three respondents are Chief Willy Ezugwu, National Publicity secretary, the Conference of Nigeria Political Parties (CNPP); OTunba Gani Adams, National Co-ordinator of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC) and Popoola Ajayi, spokesperson of a non-governmental and public advocacy organization, the United Action for Change (UAC).

A brief analysis of the responses of the above interviewees, who represent a substantial section of Nigeria on account of the groups they represent, is necessary at this juncture.

1. Ezugwu: The Bill is a ploy for Draconian Acts
2. Adams: It's a coup Against the Media
3. Ajayi: The bill is a distraction

A quick perusal of the above three responses suggests that it is not a people-friendly bill, assuming that the respondents have seen all the details of the piece of legislation in the making. It also shows the proclivity of the ruling class in Nigeria to be self-serving, forgetting soon after their election, the source of their power and what their role should be as legislators and members of the executive arm of government.

There is no doubt that the social media have become an important part of modern life. Many persons have become addicted to them. In fact, it is a sign of upward mobility to be associated with the use of the social media in today's world of volubility.

Summary and Conclusion

There is a pervasive use of social media in today's mass communication. The massive, often uncontrolled, use of the social media has unfortunately provided a situation that could be described as 'ordered disorder' as many have resorted to unethical and even, criminal, use of the social media platforms. This scenario, despite its grim prospects, does not substantially vitiate the good and productive use of the social media.

In providing theoretical basis for the work, the uses and gratification theory was appropriately explored. The pervasiveness of the social media use in Nigeria is legendary as many have embraced several platforms including facebook, Twitter, Youtube and others. The functions of the social media were found to include keeping people connected,

provoking and enhancing economic and political activities in addition to effective job search especially in a country like Nigeria with high unemployment.

Despite the well orchestrated advantages of the social media, the platform presents some drawbacks which include identity theft, loss of money and man hours, access to pornography as well as the murderous use to which some criminals have put it. Not unexpectedly, governments often make attempts to regulate the social media. Such efforts often fail because government officials are often ineffective.

Recommendations

In view of the foregoing presentation about the social media scene in Nigeria, the following recommendations are being put forward in a free market place of ideas for consideration.

- i. Some form of regulation and cyber policing is required to curtail the excesses of cyber criminals who use the social networks as tools for their nefarious activities
- ii. There should be, for instance, a way of screening new entrants as to their true identities to avoid the current pervasive identity theft going on the social media.
- iii. Given the problem of hacking which is becoming quite life-threatening appropriate counter – technology should be devised to protect people's integrity. When Former Olusegun Obasanjo threatened to fish out and seriously deal with those who had hacked into his facebook account, the criminals retraced their steps, knowing they could be in serious trouble if they were found out.

References

- Agee, W.K, Ault, P.H. and Emery, E. (1979). *Introduction to mass communication*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Baran, S.J (2002). *Introduction to mass communication media literacy and culture*. New York: Mc Graw – Hill.
- Berger, A. A. (2000). *Media and communication research method: An introduction to qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks California: Stage.
- Croteau, D. and Hoynes, W. (2000). *Media/society: industries, images and audiences*. California: Pine Forge press.
- Fiske, J.(1982) *Introduction to communication studies*. London: Mathaun.
- Imhonopi, D. and Urim, C, (2001) *Current issues in the sociology of mass communication*. Ibadan: Euphrates Publishers.
- Infante, D.A., Rancer, A.S. and Womack D. F. (1997) *Building communication theory*. Illinois: Waveland Press Inc
- New Telegraph, December 11, 2015, p.13.
- Nwanne, B. U. (2015). *Functional public relations*: Abraka: Delta State University Press.
- Ochonogor, C.I, Ohiagu, P.O. and Nwammuo, A. (2015). Social media connecting or disconnecting Nigeria youths in the 21st century? In D. Wilson, *Communication, Society and the Nigeria Child: Issues and Emerging Trends in the 21st century*, Uyo: ACCE.
- Priest, S.H. (1996). *Doing media research: An introduction*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Stanley, R.E. (1922) *Promotion*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Eagle wood Cliffs.

Dr. NWANNE, Ben U. is a Senior Lecturer and immediate past Head of Department in the Department of Mass Communication, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria which he joined after close to 20 years of robust private sector experience. He is a product of the famous Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria (Jackson Building) where he was awarded the B.A Degree, before proceeding to the equally influential Department of Mass Communication, University of Lagos, Akoka, Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria where he earned M.Sc. and Ph.D Degrees. His experience in the private sector has helped him in his teaching, research and administrative responsibilities in the university. Abraka, Delta State. bennwanne2@gmail.com