

Bridging Rural-Urban Information Gap for Development: The Social Media Imperative

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Abstract

Rural communities in developing nations like Nigeria have always a demonstrated need for communication technologies which are calculated to aid, in no small measure, rural communication for rural development. It could be said that the emergence of the social media is estimated a sigh of relief given the spontaneous and interactive attributes of the relatively new invention. With instantaneous reportage from all over the world which defies the protocol involvement of news purveyors, the social media are well disposed to allow the voice of everybody to be heard. The questions are: How equipped are the rural areas and youths to adapt to this paradigm? What purposes have the social media so far served for the rural masses? What are the challenges facing the social media in our rural communities? To answer these questions, the researchers used survey to study the use of Facebook among youths of Igbo Eriti Local Government Area of Enugu State, where it was discovered that lack of basic social amenities and compliant devices militate against the use of social media in rural areas. Among the debilitating variables were poverty, illiteracy and lack of technical know-how among rural social media users. We recommend that communication network providers should as a matter of urgency extend their services to all the rural communities of our nation to enable users have access to the networks. Provision of *steady power is another condition that needs immediate attention.*

Keywords: *.Social Media .Rural Audience .Participation .Facebook*

Introduction

Recently, the Mobile Telecommunication Network (MTN) Nigeria adopted this slogan "everywhere you go" in one of its most popular advertisements while it is very evident that it merely covered just the Nigerian urban centres or cities and scarcely the rural regions with its network. The necessary question is: Do the city centres and few rural areas represent 'everywhere' in Nigeria? Of course the answer is not in the affirmative. How then do we justify the exclusion of the rural majority in the "everywhere"? Just as Africa cries over its marginalized status in the comity of world continents, the African rural communities have evidences of neglects when the issue of socio-economic and political development are raised. The communication sector has come with little or no change in the system, this by implication suggests that overall development in Nigeria and African continent is illusory. It is good to emphasize here that the issue of communication is critical as its case remains the same in rural-urban communication flow chart.

In his famous book, *Understanding media*, Marshall McLuhan discusses the impact he expects (networked) electronic media to have on the world. Since then the emergence of a 'global village' has become a universally accepted idea. McLuhan is perhaps more to

the point when he observes that "The organic everywhere supplants the mechanical. Dialogue supersedes the lecture," (McLuhan, 1964; pp. 255-256). This paper takes a clue from McLuhan and discusses the way different types of information flow reveal the underlying power structures related to the provision and exchange of information across board for development purposes. In line with McLuhan it is argued that social interaction, or information exchange, through social media will have to play a role of increasing importance in development of the rural communities in Nigeria and this is calculated to be a good move towards national development; in this interactive sense, information provision will have 'horizontal' and 'vertical' dimensions. Social media are in that way to facilitate rural development and social change as opposed to the orthodox electronic media that are imbued with linear mode of information provision.

Drawing from the above argument, it is claimed that the social media interactions can strengthen existing power structures, to create information independence and to lead to a synergy between information demand and supply. Despite the fact that social media have an advantage of availability in rural areas, they obviously do not enjoy the privilege the orthodox have in terms of accessibility resulting from the peculiarities of the rural communities in Nigeria. This accounts for our earlier impression that the provision of networks and other prerequisite infrastructure for the access to social media from the standpoints of the rural areas has been proved wanting. Another observation of ours is that the divide between the rural areas and their urban counterpart is truly evident both from the social development angle and the communication axis as the rural areas are in terrible disadvantage, the population of the rural residents notwithstanding. In regard to the topic of this discourse.

In this discussion, our emphasis is not just on the provision and circulation of information; it goes beyond that to take into account the location of mass media infrastructure. As the saying goes, "the closer, the warmer." This is of concern because despite effort of the past to locate mass media houses in rural areas, the trend has been that almost all the media houses in Nigeria are urban centred. This imperatively has far reaching implication to the rural-urban communication relationship. Consequently, resulting from the existing trend, the mobile communication networks that made their debut in this country in the last decade followed religiously the location pattern of the orthodox media. It is worthy of being mentioned here that the rural areas are starved of developments as a result of the lopsided attention paid to rural areas and rural development which is the central point of national or even continental development in so far as socio-economic development is emphatically driven by majority of the populace. It is clear that ICTs can be communication tools for achieving sustainable rural development in Africa if decentralized and accessible. (Richardson, 1997).

It amounts to stating the obvious by saying that in developing countries of the world, especially in Africa, Asia and Latin America, the majority of the populace are resident in the rural communities. Given that participation is an index essential to realisation of social transformation and development, information flow becomes one of the measures that leads to the end. "To ensure the massive participation of the entire citizenry of the country in all aspects of the development process, there is the need first to identify all communities where the citizenry live and from where they can participate in the development process." (Koinyan, 1993 pg 45).

The issue of neglect mentioned earlier in this paper comes to bear here, the point is that the debut of mass media in our country was very significant in Nigerian historical development. It is agreeable that these media structures that Nigeria was greeted with in late 1950s and early 1960s had the majority of it (if not all) centred in the urban areas and evidently they were influenced by the urban news syndrome prevalent in Nigeria and other developing parts of the world. This is because, the media news coverage and news selection is clearly slanted in favour of the urban areas and its inhabitants simply because of concentration of both the mass media infrastructure and the press men in the urban

where the minority member of the population is residing. It is argued that resulting from the facts as stated above, the local and foreign mass media in Nigeria and others around other developing parts of the world give priority to the news events emanating from these relatively more developed centres owing to the presence the seat of governance and other influences around it. It is a known issue that the rural residents are scarcely heard of and their needs most times not attended to, giving rise to the poor development status of the rural areas in Nigeria. On this note it was stressed that there is really no more critical question facing the developing countries today, than how to face up to the challenges and opportunities presented by the information revolution particularly, the phenomenon of the internet (Brown; 2000).

The social media are relatively a new communication development that has greeted the contemporary world with their peculiar characteristics. It is calculated that the social media have the traits that defy protocols of the print and orthodox electronic Media as it relates to generation and dissemination of news. As a result, people can generate news and circulate them to the entire world in fractions of seconds without much consideration given to the status of the sender of the information or his location. With this in place, it could be predicted that, all things being equal, the rural inhabitants can take advantage of the new and social media to correct the information flow dichotomy that has existed between the rural areas of the developing world and their urban counterpart.

As pointed out above, the communication network providers, as business men gave no serious attention to the population advantage of the rural areas in making their network available to the urban centres and their suburb and the priority communication needs of Nigerians is yet to be adequately catered for. As a proof to this allegation, all rural areas in Nigeria, in particular and Africa in general are real and good potential news sources. So many interesting things happen in less developed areas of Africa and are never heard of not because they are not newsworthy, but as a result of lack of means. This can be weighed in terms of human resources, technological devices, technical know-how, literacy and other relevant indices.

The social media are essential realities of our time and one cannot pretend to be relevant without adapting partially or fully to the contemporary trend. As Bruns (2008 pg 22) succinctly puts it, "the World Wide Web has been radically transformed, shifting from an information repository to a more social environment where users are not only passive receivers or active harvesters of information, but also creators of content" As the social media are fast gaining acceptance as a potential instrument of learning for both undergraduates and advanced students, adaptation is the key to relevance in this sense. It is becoming an established aphorism that facebook and other social networking system are gaining popularity by the day. As they are becoming more viable, educators are seeking to explore their advantages in the field of education.

The term social media technology (SMT) refers to web-based and mobile applications that allow individuals and organizations to create, engage and share new user-generated or existing content, in digital environments through multi-way communication. Social media, derived from the social software movement, are a collection of Internet websites, services, and practices that support collaboration, community building, participation, and sharing (Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2011). As defined by Bryer and Zavatarro (2001 pg 327), "Social media are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders." These technologies now include blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms (facebook inclusive), and virtual worlds (Bryer & Zavatarro, 2001). Commonly, the phrase "social networking sites" is used as an umbrella term for all social media and computer-mediated communication, including but not limited to facebook, twitter, linkedIn, and myspace, as well as the inaugural social networking sites of Cyworld, Bebo and Friendster. (Charles, 2012).

Statement of Problem

Over time the rural people of the developing economies of Africa, Asia and Latin America have been known to suffer the effects of the imbalance of information flow emanating from the governments and other city related sources of information for both the print and the electronic media. Adesanoye, (1990 pg 50) says: "Television, the other broadcast medium, can be summarily dealt with. It is an elite medium, urban-based and therefore, at the moment of little or no value as a medium of mass communication."

Rural-urban information disparity has been an issue with the old media and the neglect is associated with urbanizing the old media and the newsmen. This accounts for why the rural audience hear about the information coming from the urban background, but little or nothing about the rural is heard. The social media are one of the innovations of our time that have empowered our generation with reporting from all places and at all times provided connectivity is guaranteed.

As the social media platforms have the advantage of interactivity, it is good to note that accessing the social media is dependent on availability of network and as well the computer and other phone devices. It is worrisome to note that most rural areas in Nigeria do not have GPRS networks that can enable residents to harness the potentials of the social media. Arising from the observation that most rural communities in Nigeria suffer non-availability or absence of communication networks. This research is aimed at specifically finding out the problems and prospects of social media use for developmental purposes in Igbo Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the design and implementation of this study:

RQ1: Do the people of Igbo-Etiti LGA make use of the social media?

RQ2: Do the social media allow the voice of people of Igbo-Etiti to be heard more when compared to the orthodox media?

RQ3: Which GSM communication networks are available in the local government?

RQ4: To what extent does social media usage encourage rural development?

Literature Review

A study by Hartwich *et al.* (2007) aimed to compare how different knowledge-management schemes influence innovation behavior of smallholder farmers in Bolivia. The authors compared a top-down approach with a more bottom-up approach that promotes innovation via a network of technology providers, farmers, and private sector agents. Using a case study approach and collecting quantitative and qualitative data from farmers and their information providers, the authors found that farmers who participated in network-related extension schemes had higher adoption rates of modern technologies than did farmers who participated in more traditional extension systems.

Crona and Bodin (2006) analyzed the example of a community in a coastal seascape in Kenya that faced an overexploitation of fish resources and a lack of collective action to counter this problem. Their hypothesis was that this lack of collective action was due to different structures of communication networks. Using information on a full social network (i.e., a village census) and social network analysis (SNA) techniques (i.e., a sociogram of the strength of relationships between different occupational groups), the authors established that communication about natural resource management (NRM) occurred within occupational networks: Fishermen, who used the same gear type, discussed NRM techniques, but other occupational groups in the community did not. Therefore, network structures within the community hindered information transfers and, consequently, collective community action. The authors concluded that homogeneity within groups may lead to faster knowledge transfers.

In the United States, social media applications (e.g. blogs, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube) are emerging for more two-way (or even multi-directional) collaboration and learning between extension experts, entrepreneurs and farmers that creates new space for relationship building and innovation (Cornelisse *et al.*, 2011; Fisher, 2011b; Gilbert, Karahalios, & Sandvig, 2010). The growth of new media is still often associated with urban, younger and more technological savvy users (Tapscott, 2009). Social media is, however, an active topic in extension and knowledge mobilization organizations in USA and Europe as well as in low income countries around the world and many new media linkages can be identified. "Agvocacy" networks US-based users of social media enable them to think beyond marketing applications to wider social activism (AgChat, 2012; Francis, 2009).

Using social media, it can be argued, enhances the connectedness of different components of agri-food and rural innovation systems. However, simply being able to access these new forms of media is insufficient, what matters is the development of competencies among innovating individuals and organizations in order to harness the benefits of social media. (Chowdhury & Hambly, 2013 pg 101)

Flor (2002) noted that ICT facilitates two elements critical in the Research Extension-Farmer-Market Interface and technology transfer process: information access and networking. The storage and retrieval of research results facilitate information access while telecommunications facilitate networking. In both elements, several strategies and approaches have been employed. Among these strategies are: riding the tide of popular media; community-based-participatory media; capacity building of support agencies; knowledge management and employing a programmatic approach to ICT undertakings. Technology transfer modalities include: conventional and digital broadcasting; comic books; the use of low-end ICT; geographic information system or GIS and knowledge networks that tap a wide range of ICT products ranging from multimedia CDROMS to web-based services. (Yarhere, 2007).

Leading research institutes exchange expert information on agronomic practices through YouTube and collaborative podcasts (Farm Radio International, 2011; IRRI, 2010). Non-profits are using a mix of short message services combined with radio broadcasts as "farming out" and "radio plus" (O' Donnell, 2011; Banks, 2011; Chowdhury & Hambly Odame, 2013). Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) used a process of making and publishing videos on the internet with the intention of sharing information called 'vlogging'. Short video entry trigger debates, people can comment on the videos, and share ideas, stories and information linking to other bloggers online and creating new conversations (Deh, 2009). Agricultural videos and audio scripts from around the world are being collected in searchable web portal.

The above literature points to the direction that availability; accessibility and interactive attribute of the social media are advantages that can be explored by the rural dwellers to their favour. It is so because it can be accessed by all at every time and place provided there are requisite connecting devices. The meaning is that this literature agrees with our standpoint which tries to show evidently that the rural dwellers of Africa and Nigeria are deprived of the chances of being heard from the electronic and print media but can only get information from the other divide. But the social media empowers the rural audience with the power to interact and share meaningful ideas with the world and this is capable of attracting social changes and development.

Theoretical Framework

This work is modelled after the Technological Determinism theory of mass communication.

Technological *determinism* is a *reductionist* theory that presumes that a society's *technology* drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. Technological determinism seeks to show technical developments, media, or technology

as a whole, as the key mover in history and social change. Most interpretations of technological determinism share two general ideas:

- that the development of technology itself follows a predictable, traceable path largely beyond cultural or political influence, and
- that technology in turn has "effects" on societies that are inherent, rather than socially conditioned or produced because that society organizes itself to support and further develop a technology once it has been introduced.

In his reaction to the propositions and principles of technological theory, Marshal McLuhan asserts:

Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the 'content' of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that 'the medium is the message' because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and forms of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium (McLuhan, 1995, p. 152).

It is our interest to adopt the provisions of this theory and to anchor this work on it for the obvious reasons.

The social media technology is a modern innovation which people are adapting to as the primary and key mover and driver of social change of the present generation. They have the capacity to influence the society and effect social and cultural transformation. Hence this is the case, the social media are seen or predicted to be influential in the sense that adapting to this can make the rural audience to interact and share political, health, agricultural information from their localities, and eventually adapt to changes capable of changing positively their lives.

Methodology

Survey was the method adopted for this research. We conducted this study using undergraduates and secondary school teachers in the entire Igbo-Etiti Local Government Area of Enugu State. The reason for using the aforementioned group was that this group of persons were considered literate enough to be exposed to social media.

This decision was as well premised on the fact that the students are under the age bracket that are most likely to possess the tools to access the network. For emphasis, it was only the teacher under 45 years of age that came into the population in question. Out of the population of about 9700, using the Taro Yamani formula of sample determination from population, approximately 400 were drawn as sample for the research. The population was made up of 7530 students and 2170 teachers.

Based on the varying number of the two segments of the population, two hundred and eighty (280) undergraduates were sampled, while one hundred and twenty (120) teachers were chosen for the study. It is good to point out that the students of higher institutions were within the age bracket of 17-30; while the post primary school teacher were between the bracket of 25-45. The sample sections were represented by both genders: among the 280 undergraduates were 164 females and 116 males while the teachers were represented by 78 male and 42 females.

The research was carried out in Igbo-Etiti local Government Area of Enugu State. The students from this local government were scattered all over the schools throughout the federation. They were connected by umbrella undergraduate associations from where the population figure was raised. Resulting from the varying population of town, the political wards that made up the local government was used in place of towns because the 20

political wards are more close to what the researchers were looking for. Fourteen students were sampled from every ward. Teachers were sampled from sixteen secondary schools in the local government in question. In course of the research, it was observed that some schools have more teachers than others; consequently, eight teachers were sampled from schools that had more members of staff, while seven members of staff were sampled from other schools that have fewer numbers of staff.

Data Collection and Analysis

Questionnaire was administered to four hundred respondents drawn from undergraduates and post primary school teachers of Igbo- Etiti local government area. Our instrument consisted of 12 items addressing the major and minor constructs: network availability, use of social media, which social media is often in use, the issue of being heard, and the use of social media for rural development.

Discussion of Findings

One of the major concerns of this paper is the issue of neglect and deprivations that the rural areas in developing economies suffer and this was linked to the communication passivity of the rural audience in the communication flow chart of the system. This led to the issue of the rural voices being silent and as a result rural poverty and other indices of rural underdevelopment become the order of the day. The opinions on this issue confirm that with the use of social media, the rural audience is empowered not just to talk to the people in the urban areas but the world. This is an unthinkable development when compared to the services of the old media.

It was confirmed through respondents that the people of Igbo-Etiti local Government Area of Enugu State make use of the social media as a means communication. This allows them to send and receive information within and outside their confines. This is seen as a welcome development as this is an improvement which is serving the needs of individuals and groups. It is considered so because when the services of the social media are compared to that of radio and television, it becomes more evident that the social media is better positioned to serve the purposes rural communication and development better.

The findings as well agree that in the area of this research, there are all networks, but one may be strong in one section and weak in another area. The obvious fact is that the available networks are very often epileptic giving room for poor network and consequently poor communication. All the respondents are connected to social media as their selection was purposive. Majority of them use more of facebook followed by twitter, before u-tube, LinkedIn and others.

This improvement in the communication arena is made possible in rural areas because of the availability of the Nigerian communication network providers in some remote areas in the country. The respondents attest to this as they admitted that all the four communication networks in this country have their presence in some strategic points in the area in question.

It is interesting to discover that social media use in our rural communities has been gradually giving the rural areas face lift as the people can make meaningful contributions on issues using twitter and facebook; a good example is the phone-in programmes of the broadcast media. Majority of the respondents agreed to this as 182 or 45% of them take to that option, among four options available. Without much doubt, if there should be an improvement in the economic lives of the rural audience, provision of good network coverage and increase in literacy level of the rural audience, social media have the potential to transform the rural communities and eventually ensure national development.

Conclusion

Given the postulations of the respondents and the discussions held above, it is right for us to conclude that the social media enhance rural development. At the same time there are indications that the social media technology is an invention that has the potentials of bridging the imbalance in information flow between the urban and rural areas by giving voice to the disadvantaged rural audience. In the light of the above, adequate provisions should be made for the proper use of the social media for rural development and consequently national development in Nigeria

Recommendations

- Resulting from the above observations, we recommend that the use of social media networks should be incorporated in the national communication policy as channels that should be used for rural communication and rural development.
- That the mobile communication networks providers should see reasons to effectively cover all the rural areas in Nigeria with their networks for availability and accessibility of the social media.
- Power (Electricity) is a known problem in Nigeria system; therefore that the State Ministry of power should be charged with provision of rural electrification for the rural populace as the social media devices need power from time to time for them to operate.

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