

DECODING THE POTENCY OF “WEB 2.0” IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the internet and World Wide Web has revolutionalised the media industry with new structures and methods of communication. No doubt, the ubiquitous nature of the social media has led to a significant shift from the traditional media to the interactive web-based and mobile based technologies termed ‘web 2.0’. Thus, this paper chronicled the puissance of the new media being the new genre of communication. The study beamed its searchlight on the benefits and attendant challenges of the social media in Nigeria. The work recommends urgent need for a clear-cut legal framework for regulating the usage of the new media in Nigeria and public enlightenment of the citizenry.

Key Words: Media, Social Media, New Media, Web 2.0, Nigeria.

Undoubtedly, the role of the media cannot be overemphasized. The media possess the power to work within a political system or work against it. It can oil and ease the economic wheels of a country or bring them to a grinding halt. Also, the media can be used to maintain social equilibrium, facilitate change or to seek radical alternatives (Egbon, 2001 : 115). To Yusuf (1991) the mass media serve as the barometer of public opinion. They serve in a democracy as the vital link between initiators, implementers and the consumers of public policies.

Furthermore, from a decade social forces coupled with technology have combined to chart a new media development globally. The new media called ‘Web 2.0’ has emerged as the new influencer in social, economic and political settings. Research has shown that increasing use of social media for political communication has led to declining newspaper readership and television viewership in many countries (Australian Media and Communication Authority, 2007).

This implies that the use of social media as a formidable force for social engineering and political engineering has continued to grow. The technology is participatory, interactive and cost-effective making it a potent medium for communication in the twenty-first century (Okoro and Nwafor 2013:31). No doubt, the social media is ubiquitous. Okoro and Nwafor, submission vividly captures the potency of the new media. Okoro and Nwafor(2013:31) opine:

The new media is flexible, accessible and affordable. They promote democratization of media, alter the meaning of geographic distance, and allow for ease in the volume and speed of communication.

The incumbent Nigeria’s Senate President David Mark saw the potency of the new media. He therefore averred that the emergence of social media has changed the face of media practice by making information sharing easier, faster and quicker. He went ahead to submit that the schools of Mass Communication and Journalism should review their curricular to include the operations of social media (Cited in Idumange, 2013). Without any gainsaying, the potency of the social media is becoming more pervading by the day with the mobile social media now in vogue. Given the abrupt rise in mobile computing, most popular social media platforms of the past years now hinge on the capabilities of smart phones and tablets (Digital trends, 2014). Other submissions by scholars that corroborated the potency of the new media include works by Kaplan (2012); and Bastos (2014). Thus, the mobile social media has made communication and interaction possible everywhere anywhere.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the unique characteristics of new media differentiate it from the traditional or industrial media. What we have today in Mass Communication and Journalism is the ‘social media revolution’. In fact, there is a shift from the traditional media to the social media. This is premised on social media technologies. These technologies include blogging, picture sharing, vlogs, wall-posting, music sharing, crowd sourcing and voice over IP, to name a few. Social network aggregation integrates many of the platforms in use. (Wikipedia, 2013)

This paper is an encapsulation of the potency of the new media, being the new synergy of interaction and communication globally. The paper begins with introduction, conceptual clarification of the concept - mass media and theoretical anchor for the paper. Attention is also given to a brief historical survey of the development of the social media and the polemic, deciphering the potency of ‘Web 2.0’ in Nigeria with emphasis on the benefits and the abuses and concluding remarks. The method of generating data for this paper is basically qualitative; data are sorted out from journal publications, academic books, working paper series, and the internet.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Social Media

Semantics of social media in this write-up is imperative, being the principal key word. No doubt, utility of concepts in social science stem in paradoxical ways from whatever it is that makes them inherently ambiguous, and it is their ambiguity which normally stimulates theoretical discussion about them. For this reason they cannot be defined in any general sense. But only in relation to specific cases (Buzman, 1983:6).

It is difficult to study or define social media without encountering the phrase social networking (Edosomwan, Prakasan and Kouame 2011). In literature social media and social networking are used interchangeably as most social media started as social networks. To Cohen (2009) social media is a strategy and outlet for broadcasting while social networking is a tool and utility for connecting with others. The difference in the words of Cohen rests on the features and function

put into websites by their creators which dictates the way they are to be used. However, over the years most social network and social media platforms now incorporate the sole communication function of the social media with the two-way communication style of social network that promotes participation and conversation.

With this premise, how then can we define social media? Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define 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 contents”. Nwabueze (2012) sees “Web 2.0” as the state of the Web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to “Web 1.0” which describes the state of the Web prior to 2004. (Allen, Ekwugha & Chukwulete, 2011)

Ron Jones aptly submits that social media is “a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking and bookmarking online” social media is the “new media” that speed up conversations in a more interactive way that makes communication more effective and worthwhile. It is an online media that takes communication beyond the limitation, of the traditional media (Ogbe, 2014). According to (Okoro & Nwafor 2013) the social media are interactive web-based platforms that offer citizens opportunity and place to connect, share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, expertise, as well as other things like job and career tips. Chatora, A (2012) observes that it is the collaborative nature of these tools that makes them social. (cited in Okoro & Nwafor, 2013).

Theoretical Ken

Without any hesitation, theory remains the backbone and bound edge of Humanities and Social Science research. However, media research literature is replete with myriads of theories that one can be explored in explaining the social media. This paper is anchored on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT). This theory is the handiwork of Katz Elihu, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1974). The theory centres on how users deliberately choose media that will satisfy given need and allow one to enhance knowledge, relaxation and social interaction

(McQuail, 2010). Thus, the uses and gratification theory stresses the fact that audience members are not passive consumers of the media but rather active in integrating media into their own lives (Elihu, Brumler, and Gurevitch 1994). Applying the UGT to the context of this study makes it evident that the emerging new media cannot be dissociated from the Uses and Gratification Theory in view of its flexibility and participatory potency globally as against the traditional role of the old print and electronic media.

History of the Social Media

History is indispensable, being the bridge between the past and the present and helps to prognosticate future occurrence. According to Fafunwa (1974) history is to a people what memory is to individuals. A people with no knowledge of their past are a victim of collective amnesia, groping blindly into the future without guide of precedence to shape their course (in Jekayinfa & Kolawole, 2010:1) Social networks have evolved over the years to the modern day variety which uses digital media from the Phone Phreaking during the 1950s. (Edosomwan, Prakasan & Kouame, 2011)

Many social networking sites were created in the 1990s. Examples include Six Degrees, Blackplanet, Asian Avenue, and Move on. These are online niche social sites where people can interact, including sites for Public Policy Advocacy and a social network based on a Web of contacts model. (Edosomwan, Prakasan & Kouame, 2011). Boyd & Ellison (2007) documented that the first recognizable social network site was launched in 1997 called Six degrees on sixdegrees.com. It allowed users to create profiles, list their friends and, beginning in 1998, surf friends lists. While Six Degrees attracted millions of users, it failed to become a sustainable business and, in 2000, the service closed.

In 2002, social media received a great boost with the launch of Friendster. Within a year of its launch, Friendster boasted more than three million registered users and a ton of investment interest. Unfortunately, the network was bedeviled by technical difficulties, questionable

management decisions, and a resulting drop in its North American fortunes. Friendster has since abandoned social networking and now exists solely as an online gaming site (Digitaltrends, 2014). In 2003, My space, LinkedIn, Last FM, Tribe net, Hi5 etc. sprang up. In 2004, popular names like Facebook Harvard, Dogster and Mixi evolved. During 2005, big names like Yahoo!360, You Tube, Cyword, and Black planet all emerged (Junco, Heibergert& Loken, 2011). Moreover, the traffic of people engaged in social media platforms varies from one clime of the world to the other. This portends that a social network popular in a country may be unpopular in another political entity.

Be that as it may, notable among the social media platform globally include, the ubiquitous Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Myspace, You Tube, Instagram, Wikipedia, Google+ and a host of others. In Nigeria social media common among the general public include Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook. Alexa.com ranked Facebook as the second trafficked site in the world as at the time of writing this paper.

CP Africa submits that in sub-Saharan Africa, Nigeria has overtaken South Africa to become Facebook's largest user base in Sub-Saharan Africa with over 11 million users (CP Africa, 2013). Other social media generally accepted in Nigeria especially among youths are Twitter ranked 7th in the world by Alexa.com, Google+ , You Tube, 2go, WhatsApp, BBM, Eskimi, Badoo, Instagram amongst others.

Deciphering The Potency Of 'Web 2.0' in Nigeria

Today's social media brings to fulfillment the submission of Marshall McLuhan in 1964 that the world could someday become a "global village" where what happens in one part of the world would be known worldwide instantly. (Okoro, & Nwafor, 2013, Tolvo, 2011) The flexible, participatory and ubiquitous feature of the new media that shrinks the world has made the social media a potent platform for human communication in the twenty-first century. The benefits are myriad just as we have plethora of social media outfits.

To start with, the social media helps to reach a wider audience leveraging the “long tail” concept, which means conversation can be conveyed to different forums (Edosomuran, Prakasan & Kouame, 2007). To Ogbe (2014) the social media is the “new media” that speed up conversations in a more interactive way that makes communication more effective and worthwhile. Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman opine that the social media document memories, learn about and explore things, advertise things, advertise one self and form friendships. (Wikipedia 2013)

Furthermore, the social media can be used to help mobilize people to achieve a goal or effecting a change in the society (Toivo, 2011). In Nigeria, the social media was used to mobilize citizenry against President Jonathan’s hike in the price of fuel in January 2012, also the usage of social media is still being employed to mount pressure on Jonathan to bring back the over 200 Chibok girls abducted on April 14, 2014 in Borno State. The Social media was used to mobilize people for protest that led to the Egyptian revolution in 2011, “The Arab Spring in the Middle East in early 2011, demonstration in Spain in 2011, revocation of the fraudulent elections in Moldova in 2009.(Tolvo,2011).This attests to the fact that the social media create room for increased visibility (Idumange, 2013).

Social media forums act as powerful platform for business and marketing (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, 2007). More importantly financial institutions such as banks use social websites to heal the malaise affecting financial institutions in Nigeria. Banks popularize their services in Nigeria by focusing on target customers to encourage them save for retirement, invest in education and maintain customer relationship (Idumange, 2013). Also, banks market products by engaging customers through Twitter accounts, ATM accounts and getting feedback on what customers feel about their services in order to be transparent to customers and build their trust. Social networks and websites empower individuals by using blogs, Facebook pages and websites to accelerate change in transaction (Idumange 2013).

The social media is playing a significant role in the success of ecommerce in Nigeria. The innovative application of social media platforms, notably Facebook and Twitter by online retailers

(konga.com, Jumia.com, gloo.ng, gidimall) in Nigeria to drive customer awareness, interaction and marketing campaigns has been identified by Industry watchers as a fundamental factor responsible for their massive success (Uzor, 2014). Reports have shown that social Networking platforms are driving traffic to online retail websites.

According to fourth quarter (Q4) 2013 social media Intelligence Report, which analyzed paid, earned and owned social media trends, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Tumblr drove an unprecedented amount of qualified traffic to retail websites in Q4, with Revenue per view (RPV) increasing across social channels. The analysis is based on aggregated and anonymous data from retail, media, entertainment and travel sites between Q4 2012 and Q4 2013, including 240 billion Facebook ad impressions, more than 1.5 billion Facebook posts, 500 million unique visitors to social networking sites, and 6.3 billion social engagement on Facebook, including comments, shares and also likes (Uzor, 2014).

The study according to Ben Uzor established the fact that Tumblr RPV rose 340 percent year-over-year (YOY), followed by Pinterest (244 percent), Twitter (131 percent) and Facebook (72 percent). The data confirms that Facebook is facing increasing competition. According to Adobe, social media continues to shape the digital market place with how brands can engage consumer (Uzor, 2014).

Wow Effect communications (2014) succinctly submit that the benefits of social media marketing include increased exposure, increased traffic, provided market place insight, developed loyal fans, generated leads, improved search ranking, grown business partnership, reduced marketing expenses and improved sales.

For a comprehensive understanding of the positive effect of the usage of the social media for business and marketing, Edosomwan, Prakason, Kouame, Watson and Seymour Perceptive essay summarizes the importance as follows:

- * Promote open communication between employees and management.

- * Enable employer to share project ideas and work in teams effectively, which helps in sharing knowledge and expertise.
- * Social media also promotes better content, such as webcast and videos, than just simple text.
- * Help to communicate and collaborate between current and potential customers, in receiving feedback, produce definition, produce development, or any forms of customer service and support.
- * Encourage members, or part of the company's employees, to become members of a well-recognized community.
- * Social media becomes a good venue for discussion and becomes a classic goal of marketing and communication, but the companies must ensure that the employees are adhering to the rules and etiquettes of social media.

Another important function of the new media is that, it is a core platform for political participation and communication .Politics has indeed greatly evolved in recent decade with the advent of the new technology (Okoro & Nwofor, 2013). Since 2008, when Barack Obama broke new ground by using the social media in his political campaigns; often been described as the first electoral campaign in which the use of the social media had a decisive impact. Ever since then many nations, groups, individual and politicians have continued to toe along this line (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Tolvo, 2011).

In Nigeria political sphere, the new media has become a veritable tool for interacting and mobilizing citizens towards active participation in the political process and democratic projects. This agree with the submission of Okoro and Dirim (2009) that it is through the media that people are able to participate freely in discussions relevant to public good (cited in in Okoro & Nwafor, 2013).

Nigeria employed the usage of the social media for political participation and communication during the April 2011 general elections. Four key stakeholders in the electoral process (The

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Politicians/Political Parties, the electorate and civil society organizations, made extensive use of the social media during 2011 elections. For INEC, social media was basically used to share information on elections and received feedbacks from the public. Politicians/Political Parties used social media primarily to reach out to the voters and canvass for support. The voters used social media to report their experiences and receive election related information. Civil society organizations (CSOs) used the social media tools to mobilize and educate the electorate as well as to cover and report the outcome of their monitoring of the electoral process (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012:10).

Asuni and Farris (2011:4) opined that the benefits of the penetration of the social media in Nigeria came to light during the 2011 elections. Moreover, the social media has shaped political communication in a number of ways. First, it deepened segmentation of audience triggered by the rise of network television channels and specialized magazines and websites, through diverse coverage and selective exposure. Secondly, the social media has shaped political communication by weakening the gate-keeping role of the traditional media that set agenda for public discourse. Thirdly, the practice of breaking news through the social media rather than press releases in the traditional media has gained currency in recent times. Press secretaries are increasingly losing their control as gatekeepers, as individuals now have more liberty to frame and prime issues they consider important (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012).

The power of the social media has contributed positively to the development of Nigeria youth and Nigerian populace; it has kept youths more informed and up to date; opened up medium for job vacancy advert. It has also contributed to improved efficiency, as many tasks; intellectual and otherwise can now be completed within a shorter timeframe. It has also provided social critics with a platform to monitor critique and expose illegitimate activities of government officials (Chukuebuka, 2013). In a similar vein, social media assists in exposing societal ills, for instance the October 6, 2013 killing of some students of the University of Port Harcourt, Aluu, was exposed. The current 'Bring Back our Girls' campaign is another instance. The youths sufficiently relied on the platform of the social media to solve societal problems (Ogbe, 2014).

Nevertheless, the social media has its shortcoming being bedeviled by abuses in the usage worldwide and particularly in Nigeria. According to Ahmed Olayinka Sule Nigeria could be developing a Digital Technology Masturbation Syndrome (DTMS). To him, Technology masturbation is a derivative of two words namely technology and masturbation. This he defined “as the use of digital technology to stimulate the release of one’s innermost thoughts, values or desires”. Prior to the emergence of the digital revolution many people had a number of negative thoughts, values and desires suppressed in the subconscious. Social media now appears to be a viable tool to be used by Technology Masturbators to release subconscious values, thoughts and desires into their conscious world. As a result, unimagined in our society now becomes a daily occurrence due to availability of social media among Nigerian Youth (in Chukwuebuka, 2013).

Also, the social media is a platform where youth use pernicious logics to perpetrate fraudulent activities. In the Nigeria parlance youths in this category are called Yahoo Boys/Plus and 419ers. The defrauding and killing of Cynthia Osokogwu in August 2012 is a typical example. The new media is also used to spread false rumours and inflammatory messages that heats up the polity and sprouts violence.

In a nutshell, criticism of social media range from criticism of the ease of use of specific platforms and their capabilities, disparity of information available, issues with trustworthiness and reliability of information presented (Wikipedia,2013). However in spite of the shortcomings (abuse) of the social media, the benefits far surpass the challenges.

Concluding Remarks

It is clearly evident from this study that the social media is the new modern genre of communication in Nigeria and even globally. It is very potent in view of its flexibility, participatory and cost effective feature. However, the ubiquitous and borderless state of the social media has given room to abuses, though the benefits quite outweigh the challenges. In view of the shortcomings, recommendation of policy options is imperative to curb unethical usage of the new media.

There is need for a clear-cut legal frame work for regulating the usage of the social media in Nigeria as it is in place in advanced societies of the world, where they streamline social media operator to avoid cyber-bullying and uploading of all manners of things without recourse to age and sensibilities of the users. The National Assembly needs to legislate urgently, more importantly now that the platform is a key for political participation and communication which can be used to incite violence if not regulated.

Finally, there is need for enlightenment of the entire citizenry especially the youths by the National Orientation Agency, Civil Society Organization, Parents and teachers on using the social media positively and avoiding abuse of the social media.

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