Social Media and the New Definition of Youths' Activism in Nigeria

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Abstract

In the realm of communication, innovations are driven either by pressure from society for more resultful communication means or technological advancements impressing on society, upgraded variants of existing communication technologies with potentials for enhanced performance. The emergence of social media as unrivalled technologies sufficiently complementing youths' communicative behaviours could be attributed to either or both of these situations. This paper explores the role of social media in the planning and execution of contemporary youths' political movements and contrasts same with possibilities in the deployment of mainstream media for the same purpose. It equally weighs the concepts of advocacy and mobilization as pathways to youths' political activism. The paper identifies with social media, the wide-reaching outcomes of "The Arab Spring", #BlackLivesMatter, #EndSARS protests in Nigeria inter alia. It exposes and warns against attendant untoward consequences of the different ways governments interfere with the social media environment to mitigate the effectiveness of youths' social media deployment in political activities. The work is anchored on the Fledgling Funds Model which spotlights how organizations/NGOs increasingly orchestrate social change through conventional communication media (films and documentaries) and cannot but leverage social media networks' capacity to successfully drive movements towards actualization of the needed change. This situation, the paper reckons as veritably evidential of successful social media deployment for youths' political activism across the globe today. Qualitative research approach was adopted as secondary sources of information were surveyed for data pertinent to the study.

Key Words: Social media, Political communication, Youths, Cyber-activism, Advocacy, Mobilization

Introduction

Communication could be seen as the seat of life given its centrality to the existence of man and continuous functioning of society. It provides the resources and methods by which humans relate with one another for mutual understanding. Just as it is known as a medium for dispute resolution between parties, communication supplies society with the means of discovering new ideas that help us overcome seemingly insurmountable challenges and guarantees the steady progression of society. Through communication, innovations in the different fields of human endeavour are discovered and individuals' groups, institutions or societies are acquainted with the means of adoption. It follows that businesses, governments, public and private institutions etc. are enabled to offer improved

services or apply enhanced problem-solving strategies that translate to societal development.

Notably, the media of communication are a subsystem existing with other subsystems in society as the omnibus system. They are in an exchange relationship with these other subsystems for the overall good of society and makes an integral variable in the process of social change. The media as a subsystem also represent power and act as legitimizers of the economic and political subsystems as it equally stands out as a web that holds society together (Reddi, 1999). Media ownership and use determines power relations to the extent that whoever has the requisite communication technologies and expertise to manage information in pertinent directions occupies a position of power and can strategically influence the public agenda. The methods and means of communication are integral to the integration or otherwise of the society and the direction of social change (Reddi, 1999). Among other systems, the media are attributed with capacity to orchestrate social mobilization as well as activate and direct the cause of political articulation.

Society is known to be unremittingly dynamic. It is the positive results of this dynamism that occasion societal advancement. In this process, the role of communication is preponderating given that it helps people to adapt their views to new developments and acquire new knowledge and skills for improved livelihood. When communicative efforts to effect changes are made, the process is characterized by public and private dialogues through which people define who they are, what they want, what they need and how they can collectively meet those needs to improve their lives (Global Disability Innovation Hub, 2023). This represents the ideal situation where the rule of law is given prominence in the polity. However, when government is adamant to the yearnings of the citizens and the change process has to be driven by civil society, the push for change manifests in activism or some revolutionary tendencies that government has to contend with.

Communication as a catalyst for change has by itself undergone a series of changes as could be seen in its various stages of development. Communication media and the form the communication process takes today is a wide departure from what was obtainable in its pristine stages. Human communication at some point was preponderantly oral. Interchange of ideas, views and emotions as well as information dissemination was based on the oral medium. It was followed by the development of manuscripts which derived from the culture of writing that eventually lead to the print revolution having Gutemberg's printing press as a cardinal feature. This era witnessed machine duplications of printed materials and a faster information spread. Characteristics of the industrial revolution of the 20th century, there was relative mass production and spread of information with the paper providing insurance against loss of information in that, unless damage is done to it, information was no longer as fleeting as it was in the oral tradition.

This era was followed in the 1840s by the emergence of the electronic media which birthed the information age. The telegraph was a prominent feature

of this age which also witnessed information commodification. The electronic age metamorphosed into the digital age where images, sound and text get encoded into electrical signals and dispersed and received instantaneously. Today we have social media with their unique characteristics of allowing everyone a place in an ongoing conversation as receivers become generators of content simultaneously.

The characteristics of social media are so germane to youths' communicative habits that they have practically contrived a world for themselves using social media platforms. These media help the youth do just what they want, ranging from entertainment, escape, learning, exploration /research as well as organize themselves in ways hitherto impossible with the traditional mass media to influence or confront government.

Theoretical Frame

The Fledging Fund as a model for documentary impact provides a framework for this study given its alignment with communication media use to drive social change. The Fund was established to provide support for creative media projects that educate, engage and mobilize people around complex social issues (Barret and Leddy, 2009). Its core mission is to support media projects that aim for profound social change (Deisner, Pak, Kim, Sultani, and Aleyasen, 2014). Films/documentaries that would lead to change in people's knowledge and or behavior in desired directions are funded by the fund (Barret and Leddy, 2009) with a conviction that documentaries can be catalysts for changing minds and behaviours as well as directing social movements. It is held that the aftermath of a purposeful documentary work in a ripple effect, moves from individual level impact to broader societal change concerning specific issues (Rose, 2012).

This communication-for-change model starts with the creation of communication media content on specific social issues in the form of a documentary and uses social media platforms not only to raise awareness but also to galvanize action. Such initiatives are characterized by strategic online outreach and audience engagement as key components of a result-oriented process using social networking sites such as Yu-Tube, Facebook, Myspace, Twitter etc. to draw audience to a given message and generate pertinent action (Barret and Leddy, 2009).

The Fledgling Fund Model is adjudged an appropriate theoretical underpinning for media research particularly studies focusing on social impact by providing a framework for analyzing how media projects exert influence at the individual, community and societal levels. It provides a means of examining issues of media impact and the roles of media in addressing deep-rooted social problems (Deisner, Pak, Kim, Sultani, and Aleyasen, 2014). Its reliance on social media platforms for resultfulness is evidential of social media capacity to drive youth's political activism witnessed across the globe today.

Social Media and Inclusive Political Communication.

The mass media have driven effective information flow between various groups in the public sphere. They are noted for systematically editing and interpreting the mass of information at their disposal and thus instrumental in making sense of the world for different audiences. In the process certain aspects of knowledge have been promoted over others deliberately or inadvertently and in so doing, the mass media have assumed an authoritative stance in some cases while operating according to expectations in others (Fairdough, 2003). By their nature, the mass media do not have ample capacity for symmetrical information interchange between parties in communication and they are known to contend with issues of bias when controversial issues connect with funders. The inability of individuals to source the facts from other sources leaves them with half-truths made available by the accessible mass medium. This situation does not support result-oriented political interactions where unvarnished opinions have to be coalesced and sifted for the best of decisions ultimately.

Simply put, political communication relates to the dissemination or exchange of opinions and ideas relevant to political interests while in this context, inclusivity relates to giving the youth equal opportunity to express themselves politically. With the mass media, the political class is the initiator of the political conversation process and the masses are the recipients of messages in a one-way top-down communication flow. This is contrary to the opinion that political communication is not a one-way but two-way and multidimensional communication interchange between the people and political actors (Barandiarian, Unceta and Pena, 2020). However, social media have merged sender and receiver roles in practically uncontrolled channels that encourage a more robust communication interchange (Duetz, 2007) giving the youths a means of expressing divergent political views. This development aligns with the purport of the Pluralistic Theory that the diversity of communication outlets and possibilities for access will ensure an adequate mix of opportunities for official voices of society and for critical and alternative views (McQuail, 2009).

The difference between main-stream media and social media is that the former are identified with one-way communication flow in which a few persons speak to a mass of people. They are predisposed to state or ownership and founders' control and has capability to engender stratification and inequality. Conversely, social media are capable of two-way communication flow. They facilitate universal citizenship and equally maintain the individuality of communicators, insulated from state control, no identified ownership and are configured for many to speak to many (Holmes, 2005). Social media encourage networking which allows a maze of communication platforms to be interconnected and provide opportunity for unending information sourcing and dissemination hitherto unknown in the communication milieu. What follows this situation is that, while the capacity of the mass media to cultivate universal perceptions has dropped drastically, political role models can now be met in citizens own online

communities (Ohine and Reese, 2020) where no one or institution is particularly charged with control of content.

Activism

The political activities of the citizens of a nation explain the system of government it operates. This system impacts all aspect of life in the polity to the extent that society relies on politician for people-friendly policies for improved wellbeing and cannot but react to untoward policies. Thus, when citizens feel hard-pressed with a policy in governance, they subject it to criticism so it could be modified or reversed but where government remains adamant, the citizens recourse to more practical, sometimes not readily predictable, forms of impressing their position on government qualify as activism.

Activism connects with physically compelling actions or activities directed at righting a wrong. It is a kind of face-off between government and the governed or section of the governed, employees and their employers, students and management (student unionism) etc. The Miriam Webster dictionary refers to it as a vigorous and sometimes aggressive action in pursuing a political or social end. This entails direct and often forceful action to challenge oppressive power relations or ideologies and goes beyond conventional political activities to include broader social participation, civic engagement and movements arising from the general public (Poorisat, Booster and Salmon, 2019). Notably, activism is not an attempt to overturn or usurp government but a purposeful process by which groups exert pressure on an organization or other institutions to change policies, practices or conditions the activists find problematic (Smith, 2005).

Activism takes different forms in different countries and attract equally different responses from the government in question. The forms in which activism manifests could be loosely grouped in two over-arching categories. First is the normative or institutional category which is also seen as the conventional form where legal and institutional channels to promote a cause are followed through. On the other hand, non-normative or extra institutional activism is unconventional and thus, almost radical in character. Consequently, while normative and institutional activism manifest in rallies, petitions and voting in predetermined patterns to actualize a cause, non-normative or extra-institutional activism is characterized by blockade or barricade of motorways occupation of official buildings and other forms of civil resistance in non-violent manners. (Jolinston and Gulliver, 2022). Again, there is a thin dividing line between activism and outright radicalism in that, though activism primarily embodies a readiness to participate in legal and non-violent reformatory actions, the non-institutional form it takes at times largely aligns with the concept of radicalism which represents a readiness to participate in illegal and violent political action against the state (Moskalenko and Macauley, 2009). It is commonplace that activism births radicalism and that most radicals were activists, ab initio.

Advocacy, Mobilization and Political Activism

The organized efforts by individuals or groups to bring about social or political change through such actions as protests, campaigns and advocacy is referred to as political activism (Moskalenko and Macaulay, 2009). It is focused on creating a substantive change in the policies or practices of a government or industry (Rmautsindela, 2020). Political activism survives on campaigns, lobbying, voting, petitioning, protests, rallies, civil resistance etc to resolve not just political differences but any situation for which a government is instituted and expected to handle. It is closely related to advocacy which is a core activity of social movements, representing the act of persuasion or arguing in support of a specific cause, policy, idea or set of values (Reddi, 1999).

Advocacy attempts to influence decisions of institutional elite on behalf of a collective interest (Jefkin in Mckeever, Huang and McKeever, 2023) comprising activities aimed at influencing the civic agenda by gaining the attention of those in the arena of decision making (Schmith, Bar and Nirel, 2008). Just as activism breeds radicalism, advocacy is known to precede activism and lays foundation for the latter (Lewis, 2018). Advocacy involves a dynamic process of giving aid as a backer of a particular cause. At first, it seeks to attain quite intangible results like gaining sympathy for a cause and proceeds to motivate volunteers to participate more frequently in activists' activities (Cox & Bezzullo, 2016). Advocates amplify individual and group perspectives on issue, inform groups, individuals etc. and educates decision makers about most effective options to problem solving and communicate same to government as preferred solutions. They work alongside activists pushing for reforms. (Mckeever, Huang and McKeever, 2023).

Advocacy and activism are interconnected in the sense that while advocacy focuses on amplifying, supporting, influencing or persuading others for a large-scale action, activism is more committed and involves direct actions taken with the aim of effecting the desired change (Lewis, 2018). Thus, advocacy amplifies the cause while activism executes the plans for actualization of the cause. They are complementarily useful in political activism.

Normally, the bid to address discontent in government takes a process of persuasion and mobilization given that even the most infuriated and risk-inclined will not participate in an anti-government demonstration without being pre-informed and convinced about it. Thus, individuals or groups can only be aware, get interested and participate in protest after being targeted by a mobilizing attempt (Brever, 2012). Mobilizing people entails getting people interested in a cause as well as indicating the means by which they can express their support for the cause actively. It requires activating the people's interest and building trust in them about the necessities of the expected goal and highlighting the possibility that it would remain unrealizable unless the planned action is taken. Political mobilization could thus be seen as the process by which a group is made to go from being passive collection of individuals to active participants in the political life in society (Johnston and Gulliver, 2022).

It is noteworthy that advocacy seeks conviction of the target to be part of the cause for goal attainment by persuasively strengthening its desirability to them. Mobilization relates to call for action where the masses are prompted to take planned actions to profess their position on a given issue. The actions or activities are expected to be within the ambits of the laws of the land to qualify as political activism. It is a purposive and goal-oriented activity that is a basic element of living democracies and are catalysts for the pursuit for change in authoritarian regimes (Johnson and Gilliver, 2022). Resultful advocacy and mobilization for political activism are functions of good communication.

Social Media Instrumentality in Youths' Activism

In the 21st century, there is ample evidence that religion has yielded place to education and net-based interaction as principal agents of socialization. The global youth body has got engrossed in the emergent communication infrastructure to communicate or exchange information, ideas, philosophies and skills in volumes and ease never envisioned. The link to this internet-based communication infrastructure is the smartphone which is a commonplace personal communication gadget to every youth. The rifeness of signals made available by communication network providers has got people interconnected across villages, cities and national borders. The youth therefore, have been able to form virtual communities for themselves not minding the physical distance between members and they operate a communal system the same way members of the physical communities operate.

Youths: Authorities observe that there are variations and ambiguity in the use of the word "youth" which represents a short duration in simple rural societies to a lengthy period in industrially developed societies. The variation owes to relative pressure on the young to assume responsible economic roles in the former societies (Reddi, 1999). Youth represent a period of transition from dependence of childhood to adulthood independence. The United Nations define youth for statistical purposes as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 without prejudice to other definitions by member states. While the United Nations secretariat, UNESCO and ILO are in consonance with this definition, the UN habitat (Youth Fund) sees youth as people between the ages of 15 and 32 but the African youths charter sees youths as people between ages 15 and 35 (UNDESA, nd). The definition according to the UNDESA changes according to demographic, financial, economic and sociocultural settings. It is the age at which an individual is no longer insulated from criminal responsibilities on the basis of age and is given equal treatment under the law (African child policy forum (ACPF), 2023).

The Nigerian youth policy 2009 identifies as youths, those within the age bracket of 18 and 35 though in practical terms, they constitute that component of the population between 18 and 45 years (Musah, 2023). Youths, constitute 36% of Nigeria's population according to the 2017 Demographic Statistics Bulletin (Onotayo and Folorunso, 2020). This size of the population is considered an asset to the nation on account of the positive energy they can exert on the advancement of the nation, rightly harnessed (Salami, Abudu and Yeon, 2020). Their absence or

non-participation in politics translate to a decline in political party membership and that spells an exacerbation of distrust and cynicism resulting in far-reaching democratic deficits (European consortium for political research in Musah 2023).

Creativity, energy, enthusiasm, ambition and promise are outstanding attributes of youth. They are the most active, most volatile and yet the vulnerable segment of the Nigeria population (Omotayo and Folorunson, 2020). They have practically rejected the social economic and political order in society (Odi, 2023) and are in perpetual search for information to lead them out of the earth-bound state of affairs. Their disenchantment with the political operations of the establishment fires in them an urgent need to take collective change-oriented actions. They are dissatisfied with mainstream media content, to them, that represents or project the inclination of the establishment and keeps their aspirations unendingly in the lurch.

The relationship between youth and media is dynamic, interactive and multidimensional under varying social and psychological circumstances. However, the variations between media and their interaction with youths notwithstanding, youths have been able to adapt to the changing media ecosystem (Reddi, 1999). Their communicative behaviour sometimes keep them ahead of the limited opportunities available in mainstream media and recourse to the emergent social media happens to be the only way out. Thus, youth attachment to social media is occasioned by the fact that they reflect those communicative norms and practices that make their world worthwhile.

Social Media: Social media comprise an impressive number of internet-based communication platforms that have been set up to enable and encourage users to create network of acquaintances. They provide opportunities to share messages and audiovisual materials to an inestimably wide range of people indiscriminately (McQuail, 2009). They are channels having unhindered access for various kinds of exchanges (Chataro, 2021), internet-based and related to the "web2.0" technology identified with impressive user interactivity that enhances unequalled collaborations through varieties of communication channels. Social media reliance on the W2.0 technology enables network creation, user content generation and distribution as well as storage opportunities (Kumpel, Karnoskui & Kapling, 2015). In specific terms social media are interactive web-based media platforms that offer citizens opportunities to connect and share contacts as well as opinions, views, skills, news etc (Iskika, 2018). By their nature, they appear to be borderless and have capacity to transmit feedback without delay. Access is not limited unless the user does not have the means of linking up with the internet. They do not recognize class difference in users and information dissemination and reception is relatively speedy.

These media technologies have a convergence culture involving telecommunication and computing capabilities whose content is a combination of data, text, sound and images. Contents are stored in digital formats and distributed

through networks based on broadband optic fibre cables, satellite and microwave transmission systems (Flew, 2002). The availability and ease of use of these communication media have created net-based groups bonded by shared interest and motivations. Such groups that perceive and react to issues practically uniformly are virtual communities wherein members double as producers and consumers of media content (Musah, 2013). Terminologies such as" prosumers" and "produser" have been coined to represent this situation (Duetz, 2007). In summary, this internet enabled web-based platforms share the characteristics of: enabling the creation of a set of social connectivity**,** user creation and distribution of content as source and user interactivity with received content, through feedback (comments) as receiver and sharing (reposting/retweeting as a secondary source (Obi and Chike, 2018). The media that share these characteristics include: WhatsApp, Youtube, facebook, myspace, yahoo, skye, BBM, blogs, journal, or kut, 2go etc. (Omekwu, Elke & Odo, 2014, Okunna and Omenugha, 2012 in Obi and Chike, 2018).

Cyber-activism: Cyber-activism represents the process of advocating a cause and mobilizing individuals and groups online to take pertinent action offline. It indicates the situation where people interconnected on social media are able to meet online, strategize and draw up action plans, through the instrumentality of social media and implement same physically. It has become the new norm for cyber-savvy and click-ready youth cyber-activists demanding and advocating social change through social media (Okocha & Arsun, 2022). Such actions generate from the experience and perception youths have of their country's political, social, economic and cultural climate and driven by access to the digital space and tools that have immensely altered youths' political engagements (Kaskazi & Kitzie, 2021).

Youths have equally used social media to effectively reach out to the less politically engaged as well as others already engaged but open to persuasion and interconnect a mass of citizens for offline collective action beyond the reach of mainstream media. With social media, youths found opportunity to perceive improprieties in governance and talk back or react offline. Social media have expanded their civic space, facilitated public discourse, increased access to information and have got them engaged in e-campaigning on websites and social networks to advocate for change and protest real life problems offline (Mohamud, 2022).

Forms in which e-campaigning or cyber-activism take place include "hashtag activism" and "fandom activism." Hashtag activism involves posting and using distinct hashtag to show collective action about an issue. In 2017, #MeToo was a social media based global movement where posts discussing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) and related issues including 'fermicide', rape as a weapon of war, trafficking and child marriage were highlighted. It recorded tremendous success. Participation in hashtag movements require minimal effort. Affiliation to the organizing party is not a necessity but have been able to bring

large groups together across geographic and social boundaries. (Michailidis, 2020). Fandoms are online communities of young people with shared interests that act as catalyzers for fan or youths' action online. Activists in Tiktok and Tweeter (now "X") associated with fans group for k-pop reportedly encouraged followers to pick tickets for Donald Trump's rally in 2020, there was massive online response though the physical attendance did not compare with it. Aside this incident, k-pop fans have participated in political actions that strongly highlight the quick mobilization opportunities available within online fan groups (Lorenz, Frenkel and Browning, 2020).

In Nigeria, hashtag activism manifested in #EndBadGovernance 2024, #EndSARS 2020, #BringBackOurGirls, #FreeLeah 2018 etc. campaigns just as #BlackLivesMatter in 2013 occupied the social media space in the US occasioned by the killing of George Floyd by the US police. All of these campaigns where driven by youths where Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp Instagram etc. were used to mobilize participation in these protests by uploading sights and sounds of young people making demands on government concerning the stated situations. With the right disposition and needed synergy social media and hashtag activism have been able to create a new awakening with capacity to elicit change from government (Okocha and Arsun, 2022). They offer opportunities to expand the civic space, facilitate public discourse and enhance increased access to information for youths.

In Zambabwe, #thisflag was initiated in 2016 by the youth to mobilize public request for more responsive government demanding worthwhile public service delivery and to adequately address economic challenges. The Sudanese youth also enacted #KeepEyesonSudan which is on-going and #Tasgutbas of 2019 which caught world attention by documenting series of human right violation and crack down of protesters. Also, in Somalia's local region of Portland, youths protested the hike in price of cooking gas and called out government officials on Facebook mostly and other social media platform in 2022. Government responded by engaging cooking gas companies and a downward price review was effected (Mohamad, 2021). Social media used in activism has been largely result-oriented because it evades government crackdown on political activities on the physical political space.

However, governments have also braced up to the situation through organized effort to suppress civic freedoms, via threats and restrictions in the digital space in what is known as "digital authoritarianism" it includes leaking confidential information of civic society activist, performing invasive surveillance, threatening harm to activists etc. (Mohamad, 2020). Beyond that, Guatamelan government reportedly uses hacked and stolen social media accounts of activist to silence dissenting voices. Ethiopia ruling party also hired people to access the internet and influence social media conversation in its favour while the Vietnamese government enlisted citizens to post pro-government messages on their personal social media accounts (Kajitha, 2023) to influence public opinion in favour government.

The most remarkable social media propelled movement in the Middle East and North Africa is the "Arab Spring" which occurred in 2010 and 2011 having its roots in Tunisia and Egypt and spreading to Yemen, Libya and Syria. Other places equally impacted by the Arab Spring included Algeria, Bahrain, Morocco, Oman etc. The movement aimed at redressing antidemocratic governance ignited by the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, khaleb Said. Sequel to the Tunisian revolution, the most active and largest online youth's human rights activist group in Egypt enacted the "We are all Khaleb Said" movement in April 6 (Harlow, 2013). As the call for protest spread, online dissents crystalized in offline, physical protest that rocked Egypt and contributed to the spread of the Arab Spring (Eaton, 2013).

Today, social media provides a muster point for people with shared beliefs and opinions without physical exertions. Hashtag particularly allows people to connect through shared experiences and passions which are transmitted seamlessly to others thereby providing a space for youths to crossbreed ideas without interference from the authorities. The sense of community social media offer youth has made the organization of protests much easier. They can speak out their concerns that are promptly responded to and get linked to organizers of protest through which they express their disaffections with government.

Conclusion

Political protests, movement or activism are bound to occur and recur in society so long as failings, misapplications, maneuvers in governance persist. Activists have been able to advocate and mobilize society to effect people-oriented changes, have recorded successes and suffered reverses too. Organizing such protests took a lot of commitment and sacrifice because of the ease with which government cracked down on the organizers and disorganized protest in the past. Beyond that, getting people to join the idea behind the protest and actual mobilization for participation was more tasking because government as opposition to a budding protest has all the powers and mechanism to nip it in bud. Consequently, some well-thought-out protest could not even take-off because organizers were identified on time and made to face uncomplimentary consequences.

Today, things have taken a new turn with the advent of social media in that, youths can send and sign petitions online, tweet to join or support an issue, post pictures on Instagram, create short videos on Tiktok, like and share messages on Facebook, watch videos on YouTube. By these means organizers of protest attract huge followership through social media without having to physically meet with them (Okocha and Arsun, 2022). Social media has therefore provided a bee-line between people that have capacity to organize protest and others fulminating against mis-governance to take actions to redress the situation. By this means, activists are able in recent times, to circumvent or drastically reduce government's capacity to gag dissenting voices or forestall attempts at activism.

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