Impact of Social Media on Political Dissent: A Comparative Analysis of USA and Nigeria

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Abstract

From the purview of most democratic countries and the United Nation's Charter on Human Rights across the world, citizens have fundamental right of freedom to privately or publicly express their approval, disproval or objection over issues through dissent such as protests, demonstrations revolutions as well as boycotts, amongst others. Such actions have proven to, in most times, inspire positive change, improve accountability and help to define and protect civic space across the globe. Social media networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram amongst others have played fundamental role as crucial medium of expression and social change. Thus, through these social media platforms, democratic nations like USA and Nigeria have witnessed an encouraged deployment of engaged and informed citizenry and equally enabled direct participation in public policies. However, for the countries under study: USA and Nigeria, the usage of and control of power and approach to dissent differed considerably The study recommends government sincere approach in creating forum for free speech and critical political discourses for social media users as obtainable in USA. More so, the study recommends the ore-orientation of the people of Nigeria for the proper and impactful use of the social media for social good.

Keywords: Social media, Human Rights, Protest, Freedom of Expression, Democracy,

Introduction

In most democratic countries all over the world, the freedom of expression is one of the hallmarks required for a progressive society. In Nigeria, sections 36, 37, 38 and 39 of the 1999 Constitution Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended, spells out rights to privacy, freedom of thought, conscience and expression. Despite these constitutional recommendations, the Nigeria media space has been highly suppressed by various governmental administrations throughout much of its history, with some even to this day. On the other hand, the first Amendment of the Constitution of the United States of America posits that: 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging, the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and petition the Government for a redress'.

In either of the country under discourse, social media has proved to be a veritable tool for citizens to share their imprints to the course of a society's development. This it does through giving citizens a platform to express their approval, disapproval or amendments to government policies and programmes. Thus, the social media remain a veritable instrument through which, government policies, programmes, actions and inactions are disseminated. This is why it has a tendency for effecting positive or negative reactions from the populace/citizens. However, different states and governments react quite differently to the usage of the social media by citizens and organisations to influence a change or advance a political dissent.

According to Postimes T., & Brunsting S. (2002), the Twitter and Facebook – Revolutions in Iran in 2009 and Egypt in 2011 as well as the more recent activities of the Yo Soy 123 Movement in Mexico, social media has been widely credited as an important force capable of causing and supporting social and political change. It is no doubt that social media has continued to play and expand the roles played by earlier forms of social media as well as traditional media.

Furthermore, the 2011 Middle East

uprising that affected most states therein saw to the unprecedented use of new technology for organising and expressing political participation outside the more traditional routes. Men and women, young and the old, took to the opportunity offered by the social media to express opinions, challenged social and political policies and the perceptions, communities held about themselves and their efficacy in the political system. This eventually led to the ousting of a great number of leaders in the region, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen (Fox News, 2011).

Thus, irrespective of the political system and enlightenment prevailing in a country, it does not deter the existence and progression of the media. When political leaders thence collate, articulate and shape their public discourses to meet the expectations of the masses, the prevailing media environment is used in this scenario.

Several scholars have written extensively on the activities in the political decision making arena in time past. For Cobb, Ross and Ross (1976) 'the process, by which demands of various groups in the population are translated into items urging for serious attention of public officials, can appropriately be referred to as agenda building'. Again, the traditional mass media prior to this time was an unrivalled necessity for political expression (Denham, 2010). That notwithstanding, civil society as well as political leaders can now draw attention to their causes owing to the alternative offered by the social media technologies and the internet generally. This is unarguable as shown by the civil society activities in the Arab spring and Anti-corruption movement in India in 2011 (Howard et al, 2011; Rodrigues, 2015). Often times, online activism through social media platforms such as Blogs, Facebook, and Twitter amongst others have allowed citizens to be part of the social networking exercise to engage in public sphere that would have otherwise been unreachable to them due to untold severe repression or ignorance. By this, it goes to imply that; social media has created an avenue for a faster and less costly way of transmitting information among individuals, communities and organizations in an increasing globalized world.

Thus, the use of social media as a platform to raise awareness and cross-pollinate ideas in line with or against the existing policies of a given country or administration is certainly not new. The internet has no doubt benefited grassroots movements by providing new possibilities for citizens to organize themselves. Nevertheless, there are many detractors of this uncontested role of social media. Malcom Gladwell (2005), whose criticism of online activism became clear in his article 'why the revolution will not be twitted', disregards the role of social media in affecting social and political change. Social networks, he claims, has encouraged an easy activism whereby action has lower impact.

More so, despite the evident state control in most in the Arab countries of the world, media regulations vary from country to country. The patterns of control to the flow of information and public discourse are undeniably common. All boils down to the understanding and use of political power. In Nigeria, just like other Sub-Saharan African countries, political power is seen as end in itself, to be used mainly in the pursuit of self-interest of the political ruling class, a class which claimed rights and privileges but required to recognise and accord same to the citizens failing also to acknowledge that power is entrusted to serve the interest of the people. This is totally different from the way power is understood and used in USA. The role of the social media in political dissent as not exempted in this regard.

Conceptual Clarifications
The term 'Social' according to Merriam Webster dictionary is a phenomenon that deals with, of or relating to human society, the interaction of the individual and the group, or the welfare of human beings as members of the society whereas. The term, - 'Media', drawn from the same source, is a medium of cultivation, conveyance, or expression. So, the term called 'Social Media' are forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking micro-blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content such as videos. Thus, it majorly focuses on social networking sites that allow users to create profile accounts, connect with friends and share a different type of information

(Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010).

Needless to say that, the vital role played by the social media as one of the pillars of the society in an individual's personality and socialization cannot be over-emphasised. Therefore, in an increasingly globalizing world, people can easily connect, socialize and interact with family, peers and the general community through social media networking sites, email services, instant messaging, video and photo sharing sites, comment posting et al (Mooney, 2009). Moreover, about 1.5 billion users of social media networks exist all over the world from 1997 to 2010 (Alia, 2010). This number has since, being on an incremental rate from the year 2008. Among others, the most engaged in the usage of the social media are the young people (Baruah & Dowerah, 2012). The relevance and productivity of the exercise (usage of the social media) lie in adding meaning to our collective wellbeing as a people. Thus, while it amount to sociopolitical masturbation – creating much fun for end users, it also goes a long way to yield any possible social result-sustainable development.

Similarly, Kugelman (2012) posits five different ways through which social media can be used as a networking and communication instrument. These include but not limited to, organizing and helping humanitarian issues; innovative solutions for social causes; infringement stories usually ignored by traditional media; mobilising people for social, political and other related campaigns; and faster communication between the public and their political leaders. Admitted that the social media usage is dependent on individuals and nations, it is majorly used to socialize generations.

Furthermore, the social life as well as political relationships amongst people is significantly impacted on by the social media. The political and social life of a people can be influenced to a great deal by the internet. Moreover, Social networks also increased political participation and political dissent is usually expected outcome. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, Blogs, etc., have increased political participation and given the public an opportunity to pass strategic information about various political events. Again, the political parties take advantage of avenues offered by social media to inform the public about their political plans and programmes during campaigns. By implication, this kind of forum offers significant influence in creating political awareness and influencing to a great extent desired change in the polity. It equally has a tendency for policy makers to develop strategies for political dissent against majority unfavourable public policies.

Political Dissent
Merriam Webster dictionary defines the term 'Political' as of or relating to government, or the conduct of government while it equally defines 'dissent' as withhold of assent or approval or generally to differ in opinion. Stemming from the above, the term 'Political Dissent' is a dissatisfaction with or opposition to the policies of a governing body. Political dissent may take various forms ranging from vocal expression to civil disobedience and sometimes, the use of violence.

Similarly, political dissent can also mean, any expression conveyed in opposition to or dissatisfaction with the policies of a governing political class; such expressions may take forms of local agreement, to civil disobedience, amongst others. In most democratic countries, non-violent demonstration and disagreement with the government are regarded as fundamental human right. Over the years, certain governments across the world have sought to silence political dissent. This is despite the protective rights that facilitates peaceful objection to unfavourable policies. Suppression of political dissent is usually seen as an attempt to limit or totally ban public discourse about the general performance of government.

In most regimes or administrations, dissatisfaction with government policies may be expressed formally by way of opposition politics. Sometimes, politically repressive regimes may prohibit any form of expression on public issues, leading to suppression and encouragement of political violence. Usually, individuals or groups who do not confirm to or support the policies of certain governments or administration are considered as 'dissents'. Notwithstanding this, many political thinkers have argued that any society that hopes to progress substantially needs not only protect,

but also encourage dissent. Thus, the social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. are used to cause swift drastic changes across the political landscape of the globe.

Thus, for Ghonin (2012), the key role of the social media in coordinating protests and giving of voice has created high hopes for expression. Though for Tufeki (2018), Mitchel et al (2019), Pomerantsev, (2019) arising from a few activities, more recent observers have started to cast aspersions on the social media for being inimical to the rise of populism, the spread of xenophobic ideas, and the proliferation of fake and uncensored news items. Diermeir (2011), Sifry (2011) posit that, by providing an outlet to the opposition and to whistle blowers, social media makes it harder to hide potentially harmful information especially for political and business actors.

Theoretical Framework and Application

For this study, the elite theory will be adopted as a theoretical framework of analysis. The theory emerged as part of the reaction to and refutation of Marxism. Thus, elite theory posits that, 'man can never be liberated from the subjugation of an elite structure'. Elite theory holds that, 'all societies are divided into two main groups; a ruling minority and the ruled. This situation is inevitable'. Elite theory's originates most clearly in the writings of Gaetano Mosca (1858-1941), Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and Robert Michels (1876-1936).

Gaetano Mosca, in his analysis, emphasised that, 'rule by a minority of elite would be an inevitable feature of social life and that societies in history were divided into two classes – a class that governs and a class that is governed'. The first class, always the few, controls all political functions, has the monopoly of power and enjoys the advantages that power brings; whereas the second class is governed is directed and controlled by the first. Though, Femia (2001) argues that many democrats and social radicals have rejected the theses of Mosca and Pareto and argued that, elites are not those with superior endowments or organisational capacities, but merely persons who are socially advantaged in power competitions.

It is on the above premises, which

emphasises that the avenue offered by the social media is utterly suppressed in Nigeria, majorly by the governing class. They resort to the use of the state's apparatus to suppress political dissent of any form at the social media domain. Thus, Omodia (2009:2) captured the elite impact in Nigeria:

> *The Nigerian state manipulative process adopted by the elite is a complex one that threatens the survival of the polity not only because of the contradiction of interests but equally as a result of hedonistic manifestations, but also the political elites tend to manipulate the sentiments of the masses.*

Stemming from the above, it is important to state that the elite in Nigeria, the elite who constitute the ruling class supress political dissent, wield and monopolise power to protect their interests. In recent years, the social media penetration and spread has increased so fast all over the world. This scenario has affected the political class in most parts of the world in diverse ways. The social media platforms aside being tools for the political class to carry out campaigns and create awareness on political issues also give room for others to mobilise protests on same. It no doubt, has therefore become one of the low cost and extremely effective tools in reaching the masses for political purposes and beyond. As the impact to which social media reflects on political dissent has been in front burner, of particular priority to this research, is to comparatively analyse United States of America and Nigeria.

The USA Situation

There are quite a number of ways Americans have used the social media to advance or express their support, displeasure or political dissent on issues of national discourse. For instance, surveys of the U.S Adult conducted from May 29 through 11th July posit that the social media is important to the populace in finding who share similar views with them as well as making inputs on issues that are important to them. This is with the knowledge of the unarguable avenue/platform it gives to express political opinions.

Thus, majority of Americans whether

Whites, Blacks and Hispanics, all believe that social media has played and is still seriously playing very important roles in getting the political class to pay attention to critical issues of concern and subsequently create the movement for social change or influence policy discourse. Thus, due to the understanding of all, political dissent still posits and has the potency to give a voice to the unrepresented groups. For instance, twitter as one of the social media platforms reflected the U.S Supreme Court's June 26, 2015 decision on Same-Sex Marriage which was commemorated with hashtag, #LoveWins. It is speculated that the #LoveWins hashtag was retweeted more than 7 million times on the day of the Supreme Court judgment/ruling – a figure that is far above the largest a-day volume for long standing hashtags such as #MAGA or #BlackLivesMatter

Similarly, the #BlackLivesMatter campaign is one of the examples of a hashtag geared towards political issues or cause. It equally maintained a relatively high level of usage. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag appeared for the first time on Twitter seven (7) ago on July 2013. This was in the exoneration of George Zimmernan following the aftermath of the shooting to death of Trayvon Martin. From then through May 1, 2020, the hashtag was projected to have been used 35 million times per day on social media. This figure is according to New Research Centre Analysis of Public Tweets using software Crimson Hexagon.

Subsequently, there was periodic increase in daily usage in response to real-world events. Consequently, the US Presidential Election in 2008 and 2016 and the most recent in 2020 were all important reflections to the world on the impact of social media in carrying out campaigns and extending influences. In all and more, there was no government intervention or crackdown to stop citizens from expressing their opinion. This is of course in line with their understanding and strict adherence to the First Amendment of the constitution of United States of America that clearly spells out the rights to freedom of religion, expression, assembly and the right to petition.

The Nigeria Situation
The 2020 #ENDSARS protest is a decentralized social movement, and series of mass protests against police brutality in Nigeria. The slogan called for the disbanding of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, a notorious unit of the Nigerian Police with a long record of abuse on Nigerian citizens. It involved protest, demonstrations, civil disobedience, and marches but most prominent of it all was the online activism. The Nigerian Police Force is a department of government, charged primarily with the maintenance of public order, public safety and health, enforcement of laws as well as prevention, detection, and prosecution of public nuisances and crimes. In Nigeria however, the police who are supposed to be protecting the masses, are also corrupt to the last order. Writing on corruption in the Nigerian Police force, Nwokora (1990: 96-97) declared:

> *To talk about the Police in Nigeria is like wasting precious ink and paper. We know that if there is any sector of our national life that is most prone to this infamy, it is our police force. Ignorance and cowardice on the part of the populace, callousness and intimidation on the part of the men in uniform, have made it an unwritten common law that to get out of trouble, real or imaginary (most often imaginary), just tip the police.*

It is in the light of this that in October 2020, a group of activists who were bent on putting an end to Anti-Police Brutality in Nigeria used online platforms to raise awareness against the excruciating citizens pass through in that regard. They, in this process called for the dissolution of a police unit accused of extortion, extrajudicial killings, rape and torture of Nigerians known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This social media campaign which was multi-faceted but called #ENDSARS led to far-reaching protests that elicited attention from the Nigerian Government and generated a global response. A combined team of security agencies brutally arrested and subsequently detained dozens of protesters and used water cannons and teargas to disperse the crowds as protests raged across the country. The protest continued both offline and online but on October 20, 2020, the government's crackdown on the protest movement reached its most terrifying peak. The

Nigerian security forces opened fire on the peaceful protesters in the country's commercial capital, Lagos, killing twelve (12) unarmed protesters and inflicting bodily hurt on quite a number of them.

The #ENDSARS protest obviously demonstrated the far-reaching role the social media can play in shaping modern governance and in advancing the cause of human rights in Africa. This is of course, despite the Government's brutal response The #ENDSARS protest not only called thousands of Nigerians to action through the social media platforms and but it also held Nigerian authorities accountable. This is aside the fact that it garnered unprecedented international attention and support for their cause. According to CHARTS AFRICA in an investigative report carried out by Cable Network News (CNN) bearing videos and footages during the #ENDSARS protest in which government claimed of only firing empty bullets into the air and not at protesters. This the online activism proved not to be only false but a fruitless attempt at cover-up. The video footages and live transmissions carried out during the onslaught were all over social media. From the live transmission of a popular celebrity, 'DJ Switch' and other live videos showed that live bullets were fired directly at the peaceful protesters amidst deaths. Several activists' bank accounts were frozen and subsequently arrested based on online activism. Despite the fact that the truth lays bare, the elites are more interested in protecting whatever be the interest of theirs.

Similarly, as a further instance to the above stance and analysis, the Northern Governors' Forum on 2nd of November 2020 in a bid to thwart expression and political dissent issued a Communique calling for the strict supervision and censorship of social media. Isn't that disheartening to think of that in the 21st Century, the political ruling class in Nigeria still remains unwilling and unwavering to come to terms with and embrace the changing realities of the time? No doubt, social media platforms have availed the masses of the opportunity to critically examine the actions of their leaders and insist on accountability in real-time. This is certainly not the case with Nigerian political class as they fail to understand that diminishing the truth will not help advance good governance.

Moreso, the Nigeria's President, General Muhammadu Buhari, in a broadcast during the #ENDSARS protest complained that his government's critics were spreading deliberate falsehood and misinforming the public about the issue at stake. From these and the full details of the speech emanating from the President, it clearly shows an attempt to undermine not only the protests but also diminish the right of Nigerians to form and express an independent opinion on the policies and actions of their government particularly through the social media. Most shocking enough, he went further to assert that, it is only information gathered, approved and spread by the Nigerian state media houses or platforms especially those that specifically support his administration's policies that he believes Nigerian people should only consume. It should have crossed the mind of the Nigerian President that the #ENDSARS protesters themselves were in fact, Nigerians with a solid reproduction of the 'truths' and state-sanctioned opinions of his administration.

This clearly demonstrates the inability of our leaders in Nigeria to understand how democratic expression and interactions work in the globalized era. Similarly, on the 26th of April 2020, Reporters without Borders and World Press Freedom Index ranked Nigeria 115 out of 180 in countries' analysis survey. Reporters without Borders among other things cited killing, detention, and brutalisation of journalists alongside targeted attempts to shrink the civic space by the Nigerian Government as reasons for the ranking. Similarly, Transparency International equally ranked Nigeria146 still out of 180 in the corruption index. The Reporters without Borders further revealed that the rate of aiding and abetting financial embezzlement Nigeria by the political class is shockingly high.

This is despite having more than hundred (100) independent newspapers in Nigeria. When things are perfect, relatively going well without rancour, it will not be a fancy route for the social be used as a medium of political dissent but then, the very grim reality of excruciating poverty, unemployment, hunger and deprivation – has induced political consciousness that has brought to the fore the fact that the present conditions vitiate the hope

and vision for a better life.

Again, prime and well globalized in this respect is the #BringBackOurGirls social media campaign. The Bring Back our Girls (BBOG) is a women led spontaneous movement that erupted in Nigeria following the abduction of over Two Hundred (200) schools by Boko Haram terrorists in 2014. It not only soon gained widespread presence on the streets but equally became a global social media and political phenomenon. Despite the deep schisms in Nigerian society the campaign cut across generations, gender, ethnicity, and religions. In less than three weeks, the hashtag had been used over one million times, with everyone from the supermodel Cara Delevingne to the then United States first lady, Michelle Obama adding their selfies to the mounting social media campaign. The twitter support, using the hashtag #BringBackourGirls, saw huge global media attention and a slap to the Nigerian government over the missing school girls kidnapped by Boko Haram insurgents. It also forced global leaders of the United States, U.K. Prime Minister, David Cameron, and Un Secretary General to put pressure on the Nigerian government to start a rescue mission. It resulted in America dispatvhing a 30-man military and security team into Abuja, the British another 10-man team, while the French, the Chinese and the Isrealis also announced similar assistance. Amnesty International and UNICEF equally backed the campaign using the #BringBackourGirls hashtag on twitter.

The Nigerian government considers the global scrutiny it received over the Chibik Schoolgirls kidnap as a 'trial' and an 'embarrassment', one it receives as huge cost in social capital and fiancés. It rather delved into spending huge sums and social capital to control the internet in Nigeria. In fact, within the said period, the Nigerian government spent Sixty-One Million Dollars ($61m) to acquire a piece of technology from Israeli military firm – that would help it monitor and control the internet. Despite heavy criticisms, it still shoved them to buy it. However, that 2013 acquisition wasn't Nigerian government first attempt to gag Nigerians online. Even the several attempts by the Nigerian government's political moves to control the social media using the law failed woefully.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This work set out to comparatively investigate the social media and political dissent in the US and Nigeria, with a view to ascertaining to government's freedom scale, interference or suppression of the expression of political dissent through the social media in USA and in Nigeria. It also tried to debunk the fact that government suppression or interference in opinion expression as applicable in Nigeria in a norm. To this effect, the duo countries of Nigeria and USA were put in comparative view. This is stemming from the fact that both countries are democratic at least in principle and equally practice presidential system of government. The work adopted the elite theory as the theoretical framework, while the ex-post factor model was adopted in the method of data collection.

Despite practicing the same model of government with the US, Nigeria falls short of sticking to and abiding by the freedom of speech confirmed in sections 39(1) of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria. Among other shades of social media suppression and at attempt at shrinking social media space, users and expression is the #ENDSARS protest and the #BringBackourGirls social media campaign. Thus, the abuse of people's rights in the face of molestation and suppression is uncalled for. It is extremely surprising that the agent deemed to be responsible for the failure usually becomes an element of attack. (Ibada, 2007:3; Ibaba & Okolo, 2008:6; Akpotor, 2010; Faleti, 2012; Okolo & Inokoba, 20140).

The study found out that the impact of social media on political dissent is utterly suppressed in Nigeria. This contradicts with the situation in USA, in which policies and programmes of the government encounter serious political dissent through the social media and beyond as fundamental American values in principle and in practice. The study recommends government sincere approach in creating forum for free speech for social media users as obtainable in the United States of America. Again, the study recommends the ore-orientation of the people of Nigeria for the proper and impactful use of the social media for social good. The prosperity of any nation is not necessarily dependent on how strong it is fortified, or how beautiful the adorning public buildings are but on it consists on how

enlightened the citizens are (Martin Luther King Jr. cited in Madu, 1998).

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