Social Media and Social Protest in Nigeria: Activism or "Slacktivism"

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Abstract

Three most popular social media protests that took place in Nigeria: the #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackOurGirls and #freeciaxon campaign have seen activists using social media to organize, coordinate and mobilise people for protests. The idea is to galvanise support of Nigeria's citizens and the international community to key in their efforts to force government of Nigeria to rescind its decision to remove fuel subsidy, find abducted secondary schools girls from Government Secondary School, Chibok in Borno State and for the Department of State Security to release a young man detained for sharing pictures of an attempted jail break in Abuja. This paper takes a critical look at the three online campaigns within the context of activism or "slacktivism". The paper shows how social media influence change and concludes that the campaigns were successful.

Keywords: *Social media, social protest, activism and slacktivism*

Introduction

The advent of new communication technologies in the closing years of the 20th century, has brought about a new means of communication between communities and social groups. This advancement saw the proliferation of mobile phones and introduction of web 2.0 and its interactive tools that created a virtual space, where individuals meet and discuss issues that affect public good. These communication tools are relatively cheap and highly accessible. They have creatednew ways for people to express themselves on issues that matter most to them, thereby introducing a new "shared space" in which individuals are linked

to each other and to society in a collective celebration of what they hold in common (Castell, 2007;Jenkins, 2006; Juris, 2004).

The Arab Spring,in particular, opened a new debate among media scholars about the role of social media in social and political protests(Gerbeudo, 2012; Fuchs, 2014; Postill, 2014). In 2011 the Arab nations were thrown into "revolutions" where long serving dictators in Tunisia and Egypt were forced to resign and flee the country. In Libya, the "revolution' led to the eventual death of their long serving dictator, Muammar Ghaddafi. Others like Syrian Bashar Al Assad survived the hurricane but the protests led the country into a civil war. These momentous changes have been attributed to social media and the way activists used social media to influence collective action. The activists in Egypt use their blogs, Twitter and Facebook pages to denounce Mubarak's regime (Faris, 2012).

In the spring of 2012, millions of people viewed and shared the KONY 2012 video, a short video produced by Invisible Children calling for international action to bring the Ugandan war lord to justice (Noland, 2012). The protest also generated the hash tag #Kony2012 on Twitter and the aim was to put pressure on the international community to capture the Ugandan warlord Joseph Kony, who used children as child soldiers. The protests were designed to push for the stoppage of the use of children as soldiers in the Ugandan civil war. The video went viral with 99 million views on YouTube and 1.4 million likes on Facebook in 2012 (invisiblechildren.com). However, when same video was updated and released, the figure dropped to just over 174,000 views. This loss of interest on the campaign widened the debate on the influence of social media in galvanizing social and political protests (invisiblechildren.com, 2012).

However, in 2013, Brazil faced one of the biggest protest in the country since the end of the country's dictatorship in 1984. The protests began when the government decided to increase bus fare in Porto Alegre and Sao Paulo. The protests were organized by the Passer Livre Movement, an organization advocating for free fare

(Saad-Filho, 2013). The protests got momentum when images started appearing on social media of police brutality against protesters. This led to a new and larger protest in which social media, especially Twitter played a key role by allowing protesters to organize and spread their own narrative about what was happening (Recuero, Zago, Bastos, & Araújo, 2015). The campaigns are started and ended on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms. It involves voicing of opinions through updating status on Facebook and Tweeting on Twitter. This is followed by "like", "love", "comment" and share on Facebook and "Retweet", "Reply" and love on Twitter. These campaigns are what is regarded as "slacktivism", a term coined to describe as token support for a cause without intention to put forth additional effort (Kristofferson, White, & Peloza, 2013).

Several examples abound from Philippines to Hong Kong, Chile to Moldova, Iran, Russia, Ukraine, United Kingdom and the United States of America. Hashtags were created to push forward changes in policy direction of governments, protest the outcome of elections or push forward social causes.

Nigeria was not left out in this new wave of global communication technology. The introduction of social media, particularly social network sites like Facebook, twitter, and YouTube has reinvigorated the debate regarding its impact on civic and political life in Nigeria. These online platforms that have now become global nodes for collective action (Leah, 2011) became very popular and Nigerians embraced them. The tools reinvented social activism and protest in the country, enabling activists to post and share information anytime, anywhere (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011). Activists and ordinary people alike, eager to empower themselves politically and socially, embrace these tools (Mutsvairo, 2016). It is on this premise that this paper takes a look at three social protests organized by Nigerian social activists through social media the #OccupyNigeria, #BringbackOurGirls, and #freeciaxon and critically analysesthe protests within the debate of "activism" and "slacktivism" and how they change the way protests are being conducted in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification: Social Media and Social Protest

'Social media' according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.59) is "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 content". It represents media that users can easily participate in and contribute. It is a generic term used to describe online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration like social networking sites, micro-blogs, video sharing sites and other forms of user generated digital contents. The term social media was coined by O'Reilly (2007) to describe the development of new platforms, features, and uses that build on users' participation in the form of user-generated content, decentralization, and rich user experience. They enable billions around the world to publicly express their thoughts, ideas, interests, ambitions, likes and dislikes within a shared global communications environment (Bruns & Burgess, 2016).

Central to the understanding of social media are participation and contribution. The ability to participate and contribute in an interactive way is what differentiates social media and other forms of mass media. The opportunity for perceived positive experiences and connectedness available through online communication renders social media a popular vehicle not only for the youth, but generally even for the elderly to communicate, plan events, and meet new people. Social media scholars like Fuchs (2014) argue that social media, specifically Twitter, has opened a new space for political communication, which according to Mutsvairo (2016) carries emancipatory connotations. Accordingly, these social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, open new space where groups or individuals' voices may be heard or what Yang (2016, p.13) describesas "discursive protest on social media united through a hashtagged word, phrase or sentence".

'Social media protest' involves any collective action aimed at influencingthe decisions of others (Opp, 2009, p.17). In this study, the term is used generally to describe participating in protest or

demonstration using a “hashtag” to influence others’ decisions such as negotiating or enhancing one’s resources or taking legal action. Others call it “social media activism”. The term is used to refer to "the act of using the Internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline" (Howard, 2011, p.145). However, many scholars (Gladwell, 2010; Morozov, 2011) believe that social media do very little to produce tangible social change. They see social media as just a lackluster support hidden under simple “likes”, “retweets”, “shares” and other emojis (Cabrera, Martias &Montoya, 2017). They likenthis activism to “slacktivism, a word usedto describe the lazy keyboard activism. It has been defined as “political activities that have no impact on real-life political outcomes, but only serve to increase the feel-good factor of the participants” (Christensen, 2011, p.1).

Sociology scholars (Mennel; 1990; Powell, 2013; & Clement, 2016) explain that protests signify the sound of crowd, a direct democracy or more accurately the actions and intentions of a large group of people – a collective statement, to resist the normal atmosphere of compliance with the rules and methods set by society’s ruling institutions.

Media power is important for protest. Hence, social media has become a powerful tool that activists use in organizing protests. It has created new outlets to organize and resist, which havechanged how social activists protest and the way they advance their causes. People are identifying issues of concern, and are organizingand mobilizingpeople to address these issues. Social media’s ubiquity and the potential for communicating messages to massive, global audiences, makesit an important instrumental resource for collective action and social change (El-Tantawy & Wiest, 2011).

Social Media and Social Protest in Nigeria

Before 1999, social mobilization in Nigeria, especially the type that has to do with social and economic issues were left to trade and student unions, ethnic and tribal groups, market women, etc. Mobilisation for such protests wasnot as spontaneous or fast as we see with social media protests, though successful. Examples are the

Aba Riot, Enugu miners' strike, SAP protest and NLC's fuel price hike strikes, etc. However, the arrival of social media, in the early 2000's, opened new spacesfor more people to start channeling their anger through these platforms. Serious issues are discussed ranging from poor power supply, bad roads, failed education system, to poor healthcare system. Social mobilisation using social media started growing from 2007 and 2009. Social networks began to connect more voices on similar issues and a clear demonstration of anger began through the social media. Activists used these social media tools.

Of recent, social media has played a crucial role in social protest in Nigeria, creating what Ufuophu-Biri and Ojoboh (2017, p.64) termed "mini revolutions". The platform has created new youth activists who use hashtags (#) to raise awareness on social, economic and political issues affecting the people of Nigeria. This was witnessed in 2012 when the Federal Government of Nigeria arbitrarily decided to stop subsidy on petroleum product in the country. That decision led to the increase in fuel price from ₦87 to ₦140. The increase in fuel price and other related products led to a negative chain effect on prices of most essential commodities. This sparked off a nationwide protest that spread to major cities in the country. The protest was also taken to social media with the hashtag #OccupyNigeria. The protest on social media saw Nigerians submerging their primordial identities to the larger contradiction of a collective struggle against perceived state callousness (Adibe, 2012).

Also a young man, Isiaka Yusuf, who witnessed an attempted jail break in Abuja, tweeted developments, includes a series of images showing both the attackers and Nigerian soldiers. Since the tweet, there was a complete silence on Twitter from @ciaxon (his twitter handle). A protest was started on social media with the hashtag #freeciaxon. The protest on social media led to his release by the Department of State Security.

Furthermore, following the kidnap of 276 school girls in Chibok, Borno State by Boko Haram terrorist group on April 14, 2014,

though some 46 out of the 276 escaped, there was a general outcry all over the world for their release. Social media campaign was started with the hashtag*#BringBackOurGirls* and became a connecting space for call for the release of the kidnapped schoolgirls (Litoff, 2014). According to Chiluwa (2015), the social media campaign *#BringBackOurGirls* carried photographs of protesters and graphic images of children and schoolgirls making the campaign a global campaign.

Social Media Protest in Nigeria: Activism or "Slacktivism"

The examples used above show how social media was used for social protest and activism in Nigeria whichalso raise the debate on"traditional" methods used by Labour Unions, students' activists and other protests groups, in the form of strikes, boycotts and demonstrations to press forward their demands, oppose government policy, or campaign to raise awareness on an issue affecting the society in general. Many scholars (Glenn, 2015) argue that tangible resources like space to organize protests and rallies havebeen changed or replaced by punching a computer or mobile phone keyboard to "like", "comment", "tweet" or "retweet" an issue, whichhe sees as real activism.

However, social protest on social media according to some scholars is just a delusion, an avenue for lazy activist (Morozov, 2012). Morozov believes that contrary to "cyberutopians", who see the Internet as a powerful tool for emancipation, the Internet is to a large extent nothing but a tool for abolishing freedom. Gerbaudo (2013) sees social media activists as individuals who seek technical fixes or 'solutions' to complex societal problems. However, scholars see it asa public space free of government and corporate control in which citizens can freely express their voices (Rohlinger & Brown, 2009; Siapera, 2004) and 'game changers' that circumvent the mainstream media censorship and mobilise at great speed. Indeed, protests in Nigeria have transformed from historical form of activism – marching, public speaking, protests, physical petitions, and strikes are giving way to "slacktivism".

"Slacktivism" is a combination of two words – "slacker" and "activism", to describe the connection between activism and

awareness through the use of social media (Glenn, 2015).It can be defined as opposite of “practical activism” and low-risk, low-cost activity via social media. Its purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002).Some scholars(Gerbaudo, 2012; Morozov, 2012) believe that social media activism or protest is overhyped. The opposing views suggest that those using social media to voice opinions are just being lazy. They argue that online social and political activity often fails to achieve real-world change (Conroy, Feezell, &Guerrero, 2012).

Thehashtagged protests in Nigeria were not entirely online except the #freeciaxon campaign which started and ended on social media. The other two also have physical components. The #BringBackOurGirls and #OccupyNigeria campaigns had both online and offline campaigns. Inthe words of Ben Hewitt from ‘A World At School’, “some people raise their voice once in solidarity and others keep a much longer vigil”. In the #OccupyNigeria protests, there were physical demonstrations in Nigeria’s major cities.The protesters in Nigeria used Facebook groups to spur Nigerians globally against the fuel-subsidy removal regime. One of these group called "Nationwide Anti-Fuel Subsidy Removal: Strategies & Protests" had over 20,000 members during the period.

It is arguable that all the three campaigns yielded positive response from the government. The fuel subsidy regime was returned by reversing the earlier decision of increasing it with almost 100%. Also, some of the Chibok girls were rescued and the government was forced to enter into negotiation with the terrorists group Boko Haram which helped to free 82 of the girls. Isiaka Yusuf, the young man whose arrest led to the #freeciaxon campaign, was released after 13 days in SSS detention. The BBC reported in its #BBCTrending website that the youngman’s arrest led to a widespread outcry on Twitter as Nigerians demanded for his release. Initially the DSS denied arresting him, but later accepted but said the agency should not be expected to turn away from the offence as a result of the offender’s ignorance (https://www.channelstv.com/tag/freeciaxon/).

Conclusion

From the discussions above, using the three popular hashtag campaigns, it can be argued that social media protests are successful in Nigeria. Social media tools have become promising in organizing social protest to demand government to act in accordance with popular wishes similar to what obtains in other parts of the world such as the Arab Spring protests.

Finally, whereas the social media has the potential to support protest for meaningful social change, the concerns about "cyberutopians", that is, social media activists as lazy activists or "slacktivist", could be seen as real taking into consideration that mere "technical" solution is applied to complex societal problems.

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