

Social Media: A Precursor to Escalated Political Violence in Nigeria

OBATUNDE BRIGHT ADETOLA

Abstract

The Little Media has become veritable means of communications in the recent times such that it cannot be taken for granted by any public office seeker. Its reach is unimaginable and its impact is unfathomable. It is only the uninitiated or geriatric politicians that will joke with the importance of the Little Media. In these Media, there are outlets such as Naija Politics, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and so on and they have contributed tremendously on information sharing with the speed of light. Such outlets have become a battleground for cyber warriors who give information on many political issues in Nigeria and they most times misinform (as well) due of the youthful nature of the participants, who are not careful to verify the news items (they have because of the false impression that their identity could be hidden). The paper argues that the little media has become a very potent battleground that serves as a dangerous precursor to visible physical violence in Nigeria's political space in the last few years of return to democracy. It however conclude that the false impression of 'hidden identity' the youth have to perpetuate unfounded political distortion of facts to harass political opponents will begin to fade away if and only if Nigerian politicians know and believe that applies, online and offline.

Keywords : Social media, Internet, Politicians, Cyber Warriors, Defamation, Media Ownership

Author: Obatunde Bright Adetola, Department of Sociology, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State Nigeria, **Email:** octomay07@yahoo.com

INTRODUCTION

Information is a major factor in any social relationship. It determines and shapes how humans and even animals relate to one another. Information in itself is a mere collection of facts from which conclusions may be drawn. It is knowledge acquired through study, experience or instruction. It could also connote a message received, and understood. More important than 'information' itself are other factors that help to disseminate the information, which include the means/mode of communication, the carrier of the information; the 'owner' of the information; the purpose/utilization of the information and so on. It is these other factors that this

paper intends to dwell on particularly the Little Media otherwise known as Internet in the globalized world. The focus on the Internet communication will however be done without losing out the nexus between the other media- the print, the Television and the Radio.

The Media in Nigeria

It is incontrovertible that revered Henry Townsend founded the first newspaper in Nigeria in 1859. His paper was “Iwe Irohin”. Ever since then newspaper business has grown tremendously and it has contributed to the socio-economic and political development of Nigeria. Since 1859, Individuals, groups of people, organisations and government have become proprietors of newspaper business for various reasons. What is striking in the pattern of ownership since then is the preponderance with which politicians establish newspaper houses. Among them are Late Hurbert Macaulay, Dr Nnamadi Azikiwe, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, Dr Mbadiwe, Gen Shehu Yaradua, Dr Chuba Okadigbo, and Chief Anthony Enahoro – all of blessed memory. All of these, as the table-1 shows, seemed to contain political rather than economic reasons for their establishment. And, interestingly, were mainly located in the South with private ownership.

Table 1 : Chronological History of Newspapers in Nigeria

Newspaper	Name of Publisher/Promoter	Years of Establishment
West African Pilot	Dr. Nnamadi Azikiwe	1934
Eastern Nigeria Guardian	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	1940
Nigerian Sportsman	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	1943
Southern Defender	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	1940s
The Comet	Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe	1945
Nigerian Tribune	Chief Obafemi Awolowo	1949
Daily Telegraph	Dr. Mbadiwe	1958
The Reporter	Late. Gen. Shehu Yaradua	1987
The Champion	Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyawu	1988
Platform	Dr. Chuba Okadigbo	1989
Africa and the World	Dr. Chuba Okadigbo	1989
The Sunday World	Chief Anthony Enahoro	1989
The Weekender	Chief Anthony Enahoro	1989
Vista	Chief Anthony Enahoro	1989

The return to democracy in 1999 equally increased the return of politicians in the ownership structure of newspaper houses. The likes of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Otunba Gbenga Daniel, James Ibori, Mr Orji Uzor Kalu all Governors established newspaper, Radio Stations and Television Houses.

Table 2 : Establishment of Print and Electronic Media in Nigeria

SN	Newspaper/Radio/ Television	Name of Publisher/Promoter	Year of Establishment
1.	The Nations	Bola Ahmed Tinubu	July 31, 2006
2	Nigeria Compass	Otunba Gbenga Daniel	May 26, 2008
3	Daily Independent	Chief James Ononefe Ibori	October, 2001
4	Daily Sun	Chief Orji Uzor Kalu	June 16, 2003

What is worthy of note in the politicians of this dispensation is their capacity to own virtually all means of communication that were hitherto the exclusive to government establishment due to the huge cost involved in setting up the media outlets. Individuals now rub shoulder or sometimes surpass governments, be it at state level or federal in the ownership of media house in Nigeria. If the most capital intensive are owned by individual politicians, what do we then expect of the Little Media?

THE SOCIAL MEDIA

The social media may be small in a way in comparison with the traditional media such as Newspapers, Radio and Television, its impact and reach is in no way small at all. In fact, its reach is worldwide with speed of light as far as transmission and exchange of information is concerned and this was aptly captured by *the Chinese Defence Science and Technology Information Monthly Issue 121, 5th Issue, 1998*. Where it was reported that, “the Internet has spread to more than 180 countries and regions, connecting more than 600,000 domestic networks of various types, hooking up more than 120 million computers available to 120 million users (2% of the entire global population)”. Today, the reach of Internet has increased by leaps and bounds.

The impact of the Social Media in relation to political violence globally is still fresh in our memory with the Arab *Spring* that started with the Jasmine Revolution in Tunis; Tunisia after Mohammed Boaziz set himself ablaze as a result of State oppression. The popular social networks hitherto meant for social communication and exchange of socially related materials readily became a political tool and weapon of war and communication, which saw the end of many sit-tight governments in the Arab world. The government of Ben Ali collapsed after several youths mobilized themselves from several villages to the city-centre to demand for the resignation of Ben Ali – the Tunisian president of many years. The fall of Ben Ali gave strength to other neighbouring countries, which suddenly discovered the potent power of Social

Media for political communication and action. Egypt's Hussein Mubarak fell and Libya's Muhamar Ghadafi equally fell as a direct consequence of socio political mobilization of aggrieved youths against their various oppressive and tyrannical governments of several years that spanned two or more decades.

From the forgoing, we may infer that the interest of the politicians for establishing media empires be it traditional or modern would definitely first be political and then others. Were it not so the period of military rule in Nigeria would not have been devoid of any politician owning a media house. Rather, the ownership structure then, was more of government, groups of radical scholars and civil societies.

The same political interest that propelled the modern politicians to acquire wealth to own virtually every means of communication extended to the Internet. The Internet political space / domain is under all forms of control in terms of promoters and host of the sites that maintain a series of web pages on the world wide web and the operators or participants that are sometimes referred to as 'Internet warriors'.

The 'Internet warriors' are mostly youth who are more often than not recruited by the politicians to initiate, propagate, substantiate, and perpetuate all forms of political ideas, information, and interests for themselves. The same sets of people are used to attack any perceived political opponent or interest or both. Since the identity of the Internet warriors can be camouflaged by the use of pseudo names, many take advantage of this window of 'opportunity' to disparage political opponents of their paid masters. Sometimes, one Internet warrior could operate as many as five or more names, chatting and exchanging information or misinformation about any perceived opponents.

Indeed, many of the pieces of information or misinformation that could not be published in the traditional media (print and electronic) due to media control by agencies like Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) are mostly hosted on the Internet since there still seems to be a very slow response in the Nigeria legal system, to Internet offences that borders on libel. This avenue has therefore become a major battleground where political violence is bred before its final physical escalation in the passive or unsuspecting public in Nigeria.

In their account of the negative impact of the Internet on the society, Imhonopi and Urim (2004) observed that Little Media has contributed to dominance of neo-liberal ideology; cultural invasion; moral decadence; security threats, Internet crimes and more importantly to this paper, information warfare beyond acceptable limit in any civilised society. Still Quoting the *Chinese Defence Science and Technology Information Monthly* again Imhonopi and Urim noted that:

At a time when the information networks have become an important infrastructure of the nation and the military, the information warfare will be a war without the explosives, a war with high invisibility, low cost, international, and multi-area (political, military, economic, social and material resources etc.) approach. The high-tech nature and the unpredictability of combat intelligence in information warfare have made it extremely difficult to organize an information defence.

MEDIA AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There is no doubting the fact that there is a nexus between media activities in Nigeria and political violence. This nexus would be explained here using the Marxist theoretical position and the media occupations and professional theory.

The traditional Marxist view of the world have always been that of existence of two major classes of people in the society one of which has and control the means of production while the other do not have nor control the means of production. And that since human life in any society is organised along production for the survival of the society, it then follows that all it takes to survive by any human being must be a function of what happens at the production process and importantly the class he/she belongs in the line of production. For the Marxist therefore, the economy, which is the infrastructure upon which the super structure stands, is a determining factor for the survival of people. Those that own the means of production, to the Marxist, belong to the dominant class whose interests are protected from the rampaging opposing Internet of the dominated class.

The dominant class over the years have used several means to maintain its control, dominance and influence over the society. Apart from religion, and ideology, the mass media is one of the very potent tools in the hands of the dominant class to maintain the status quo and thereby forestall any attempt to effect a change in the society. For Marx, “In every epoch, the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class”. The Marxian theorist therefore concludes that the media, which basically publish views, opinions, ideas of people, readily becomes a tool in the hands of the dominant class to propagate the idea of its class as the ruling idea in the society. By this means, the ruling class is able to maintain its control and perpetual dominance over the dominated class.

Marxian Scholars believe that ruling ideas control the information we have about the world, shape our perceptions and perspectives and influence our responses to news content, trend and style. This process or status quo is sustained because the capitalist class has unrestrained and unlimited access to the resources which enable its members to present their ideas as 'normal. Marxist theories argue that while the pluralist perspective claims that there is a marked diversity within the media messages, there is indeed centralized ownership, that is, a few individuals and media corporations own and operate most media. This is true of what obtains in Nigeria, as many media houses and institutions are owned, financed and run by few but powerful individuals in society who determine the quality and quantity of news content, give a jaundiced slant (interpretation and bias) to media message and filter news content to determine what society hears or sees and what is swept under the carpet. Imhonopi and Urim 2004: 29

While the Marxist theory is able to offer how the dominant class has been able to control and sustain its dominance structurally, it has however not been able to explain satisfactorily the process used by dominant class to continue to influence the dominated class. That is why the Media Occupation and Professional Theory are vital in order to establish the nexus between media and political violence in Nigeria.

For the Media Professional theorists, “*the internal characteristics of the media organisations provide useful information which helps to explain media content and effects*” (Imhonopi and Urim 2004). In their list of criteria, which is adopted by

journalists in assessing the news worthiness of a story and determine its publishability, Galtung and Ruge (1965) identified reference to person and reference to something negative as major determinants of what is published or not (see Imhonopi and Urim 2004).

On reference to persons, they argued that “stories which can be simplified by personifying the issues into one or more people are desirable, especially if there is conflict between those people” (see Imhonopi and Urim 2004). And on reference to something negative, bad news is news ‘and sells more than good news (Haralambos, 2000).

The two references above are basically the root of political violence in Nigeria through the media. Violence is a constant feature where there are different interests not guided by any profound ideology or civility for the development of any society. Ideology removes the veils of superstition, ignorance, obscurantism, and mystification. Ideology has to do with an illumination of reality, unfolding of reality (Patrick Wilmot in Alliyu 2010). It was these ideas and ideologies that were the bedrock of journalism in the times of great Nigerians, such as Herbert Macaulay and Nnamdi Azikiwe, Ernest Ikoli and a host of others that used ideology based journalism to fight colonialism to a standstill (Alliyu 2010). In contrast, Alliyu noted further that today there are fights and there are fights on the pages of Newspapers and he queried if these fights are devoid of materialism and patronage.

Still along the same line of thought, Emma Nwatu’s account in the Guardian on Sunday, August 3, 2008 in Alliyu (2010) concludes that;

Today, things have really fallen apart. Poor grammatical construction, speculations, insinuations and outright propaganda are now served the public in opinion columns. Some experts regard this as junk practice. Yet, this has become the common feature of most publications, including some of the front line newspapers

These unwholesome developments in the media further made Alliyu (2010) to infer that newspaper and/or journalism has become a veritable tool in the hands of the bourgeoisies and some affluent class in Nigeria. And that has already, worsened media situation, going by some recent political developments; prepared ground for the

collapse of the noble profession that is supposed to be cynosure of idea generation and production. The unceremonious exist of two top fliers Editorial Board members and journalists of a frontline newspaper in 2010 in Lagos lend credence to the decadence gradually overrunning the media profession. More importantly however, are the direct and indirect consequences this unwholesome practice has on the political space of the country, which tilts more towards violence.

The Print Media Information Warfare: The Lagos-Ogun State Axis Pre-2011 Election year

I have argued elsewhere that the structure of ownership of Media Houses in Nigeria and the level of poverty of ideas have continued to impact negatively on the contributions of the media on the democratic process of Nigeria especially by a section of the media. It is within this context that I will place the media reportage of events in Ogun State by a section of the Media in the pre 2011 election year. An advertorial on Thursday 10th June 2010 published in the Nigerian Tribune and signed by a former Information Commissioner in Ogun State, Nigeria depicts two National Newspapers *'as News Media that have thrown professionalism, decency, decorum and journalistic ethics that go with it into the dustbin. Objectivity, fairness and balanced reporting have no place in the two Newspapers, all in a sustained effort to do the bidding of their proprietor. The overall disposition of the two publications is basically adversarial and hostile both to the person of the Governor of Ogun State and the State Government'*. Aside from the advertorial, a petition to the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) was also done about the activities of the papers. Still citing the advertorial, it went further to insist that *'In certain cases, where either of the two publications has an overall of 85% negative coverage, no other publication among the national dailies has more than 5% negative coverage. What this shows very clearly, is that both newspapers have this brief to deliberately peddle falsehood and portray both the Governor and Government of Ogun State in bad light on a consistent basis. With this disposition, the two publications have done damage to their own reputation and integrity. The reading public, local and international should therefore know that both newspapers are grossly unreliable and not trustworthy in terms of truth and the best practices of journalism, at least concerning Ogun State. He went ahead to ask Where are the pillars of Journalism-Objectivity, Fairness and Balance? And he concluded that: Although the two newspapers have carved a niche for themselves as unreliable sources of truthful information, the kind attention of the*

Nigeria Press Council (NPC), the Nigeria Guild of Editors (NGE), the Nigeria Union of Journalists (NUJ) and Newspapers Proprietors Association of Nigeria (NPAN), are hereby drawn to this outright debasement of all known professional ethics of Journalism in the firm expectation that they will take appropriate measure to put in effective check to this debasement of the otherwise respectable profession of journalism''.

The content and tone of the Advertorial under examination here reveals a 'civil version' of the information war between two frontline politicians in the southwest and media house owners. The other side, which is very dirty, is hosted on the Internet –the Social Media- where the good, the bad and ugly are accommodated and un-moderated for now by anybody in Nigeria. It is this semblance of uncontrolled freedom that has made the Social Media – the avenue to deal dirty with political opponents and interests. The impact of this has been very significant and devastating to those who are at the receiving end of the negative political use of the Little Media. It has also continued to make a large army out of Nigerian youths, though well informed now but, largely uneducated about the extent of damage information mismanagement could do to any development process. The dirty nature of Social Media will definitely be for a very long time to come especially if the stakeholders are not moderated, checked and punished where necessary. This is however not the case with the traditional media.

It is important to point out that a section of the media actually paid heavily for reckless journalism, unethical conduct and outright lies against a Governor during the time under consideration.

They include:-

- 1) The Leadership Newspaper - The paper had published a libellous story in 2006, where it was alleged that the wife of a former Governor was arrested with 55,000 pounds cash in London. The Newspaper has however published an apology and retraction to the affected people on page 55 of the Guardian Newspaper of Tuesday 12th October, 2010.
- 2) The Insider Weekly published by Insider Communications Limited of 36A, Acme Road, Agidingbi, Ikeja, Lagos, Nigeria was challenged in the Court of Law for falsely and maliciously printing and publishing in their April 17, 2006 edition which came into circulation from Sunday the 9th of April 2006

that a certain Governor and his wife were involved in money laundering with a bold caption as follows in its front page of that edition: **“MONEY LAUNDERING- GOVERNOR, WIFE ARRESTED IN LONDON, UNDER SURVEILLANCE, HIS LOOTING OF.....”**.

In delivering his judgement in one of Nigeria’s High Courts of Justice in Suit No. AB/76/2006 between (Plaintiff) and Insider Communications Limited- (Deputy Editor-in Chief, Insider Communications Limited); (Senior Writer, Insider Communications Limited) Defendants, His Lordship Honourable ruled that:

I believe the Plaintiff is entitled to Damages. No amount of Damages can adequately compensate the Plaintiff for the damage done to his family. No amount of monetary compensation can restore him to the position he was before the defendants defamed him, to place him in a position as if he had not been defamed at all. He is however certainly entitled to damages and an Order of Injunction to prevent further mischief by the Defendants. The Plaintiff- is granted the following (11/08/2009):

N300,000,0000.00 (Three Hundred Million Naira) being Aggravated Damages for the Libel contained in an Article/Story ; An injunction restraining the Defendants whether by themselves or through their servants, or agents, or otherwise howsoever from further printing, circulating, distributing or otherwise publishing any copies of the said magazine containing the said Libel. -

Going by this judgement got by the plaintiff it is only clear that where such a plaintiff fail to take the option of court, violence may be the readily available alternative, which most often is perpetuated by the followers of the politicians with or without knowledge and support of the principal.

CYBER INFORMATION WARFARE: THE LAGOS-OGUN STATE AXIS PRE 2011 ELECTION YEAR

The Social Media has become veritable means of communications in the recent times such that it cannot be taken for granted by any public office seeker. Its reach is unimaginable and its impact is unfathomable. It is only the uninitiated or geriatric politicians that will joke with the importance of the Social Media. In this Media, there are outlets such as Naija Politics, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and so on and they have contributed tremendously on information sharing with the speed of light. Such outlets have become a battleground for cyber warriors who give

information on many political issues in Nigeria and they sometimes misinform as well. However, any misinformation is, most often than not, ‘corrected’ by members of the group. Expectedly the race towards the governorship election in April 2011 was dragged to the venue by the ‘Cyber Warriors’. And, two former aides of the Governor of Ogun State that fell apart with him were regular members at some if not all of the online Media where, they serve the whole world with their venom of hatred for their principal and all he stood for. It is important to note here that most of what was shared as information or misinformation on this platform were unprintable letters about politicians by politicians in Nigeria. They are therefore not citable in this kind of scholarly work on the one hand and on the other, the authors and source of the information are shrouded in secrecy.

Nevertheless Bernet G. Kelly a Santa Monica California Attorney who specialises in Internet Law, posits that “the law applies, online and offline”. Nigerian courts should be persuaded by now to extend their tentacles, going by the number of people harassed, maligned and defamed through the Internet in Nigeria. The law must be used to unmask all troublesome cyber Ciphias. Only recently, Carla Franklin won her case in the United States when she made the court to compel Google to reveal the identity of an online harasser of a business consultant who wanted to know who has been anonymously disparaging and fixating on her online (Alliyu 2011).

Both the print media and the Social Media were deployed to wage the information warfare without limit such that political tension in Ogun State was at a breaking point. Issues that should ordinarily not enjoy any mention in a forthright newspaper, most times, became the celebrated ‘news items’ in the editorial columns of Nigeria Newspaper and cyber spaces.

The story has changed now that Daniel’s PDP lost Ogun State to Bola Tinubu’s ACN the media reportage has suddenly turned around. The two newspapers that never saw any good in Ogun State under a Daniel administration now sing praises of Ogun State Administration under Sentor Ibikunle Amosun (the new Governor of Ogun State). A careful observer will wonder if Ogun State had suddenly become heaven where there are no more bad roads, no water especially in Abeokuta – the state capital and so on.

Interestingly, the Nigerian Compass promoted by the former Governor of Ogun State, which did not report any negative events in Ogun State while its promoter was in power or at least pretended and used less offensive words has now assumed the role of official opposition paper hammering Ibikunle Amosun consistently on his style of Administration in Ogun State.

The cyber warriors of both camps equally switch role immediately power exchanged hands in Ogun State in May 29, 2011. The two opposing camps on the Social Media sometimes go in the direction of pamphleteering pieces of information exchanged on the net at every available political gatherings in an attempt to further disseminate the information to members of the public that are not Internet freak. Such gatherings are, more often than not avenues that trigger political violence.

CONCLUSION

Part of what was considered vital about information in introductory section of this paper is the purpose and utilization of information. This is very relevant in the context of the current political discuss which focuses on violence. It is almost impossible to have a violent free society. However, it could be reduced to the minimum if progress must be made in any society. It is therefore the opinion of this paper to stress the need for the effective use of the legal system to curb the use of information in the media as a remote cause of political violence. The print media have had its share of the law taken its toll on media houses and journalists in the past, as far back as the early 1940s, for various offences particularly libel.

Nnamdi Azikiwe (1999) noted for instance that

Due mainly to inexperience, Enahoro allowed himself to be decoyed into publishing what turned out to be criminal libel against a former Governor of Nigeria, Sir Bernard Burdillon, whom I rate as a very considerate, humane and reasonable person and a friend of the African. Enahoro's informants deserted him at the hour of trial and he had to bear semblance of a defence, he was sentenced to a stretch of some months in prison. Pg 302

The Social Media must also begin to experience some sanity and decency in communication and media activities. This can only be done if only Nigerians begin to challenge in court all cases of libel or scandalous publications in the Internet knowing fully that the law applies both online and offline.

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