Social Media and Public Sector Management in Post Covid-19 Nigeria: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: *Social Media is an invaluable means of disseminating information to the citizenry; hence, it is a powerful tool of propaganda. In many parts of the world, the social media acts as a two-edged sword as it allows citizens to be privy to information without impediments. However, this same tool has been used to misinform the populace and to circulate unverifiable and deceptive messages to citizens. As regards this, the basic question becomes: how do we strike an acceptable balance between information and misinformation? To this end, this qualitative study explored how best harness the social media for effective public sector management in post COVID-19 in Nigeria. The paper argued that as the importance of social media is not lost on the general public for information engagement, its abuse in Nigeria is not lost either, especially to any keen observer of the Nigerian sociopolitical environment. Findings from the paper revealed that the responsibility for credibility of information lies not only with the citizens and the social media companies, but also with the government and its agents. In this wise, the paper recommended, among others, that social media companies should step up their game in sanitizing their online communities for better accountability, checkmate fraud and prevent issues of cyber bullying and hate speech and that there should be appropriate mechanisms to sanction defaulters. To this end, social media organizations should collaborate with government agencies in their countries of operation to identify and punish those who take advantage of the social media to perpetrate fraud and other forms of misinformation.*

Keywords: Social media, Public sector, Management, COVID-19, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Traditional modes of communication are increasingly giving way to new and modern communication patterns aided by the use of technological tools and the internet. According to World Internet Stats (as cited in Mohammed, 2021), Nigeria ranks 6th globally on the list of internet usage. As at 30 June 2019, internet users in Nigeria were put at over 123 million. This makes the internet space in Nigeria a veritable platform for civic engagement, displacing traditional media outlets like the radio, print media (Newspapers) or television (Nzewi, 2021).

The advent of new media the age, mode and pattern of sending and receiving information as well as communication processes. It has also availed a lot of young people, the opportunity to better communicate, share and receive information and engage in one form of economic activities or the other. Also, the government on its part have taken advantage of the spread, reach and opportunities of the new media to better engage its citizens in order to ensure efficient and effective management of the public sector.

The new media, also known as the social media is a dynamic and innovative channel of communication with several outlets like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, WhatsApp, Telegram, etc. These outlet has been utilized by the government to enhance the gains of electronic governance (E-governance). The outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic with its attendant disruption of economic and social activities amplified the exigencies of the social media as a tool for social interaction and connectivity.

In the battle to arrest the scourge of the coronavirus pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) released several guidelines for preventing the spread of the virus. Chief among them were frequent washing of hands with soap under running water, frequent use of alcohol based hand sanitizers in the absence of soap and running water, frequent use of disinfectants to clean our environment and other physical surfaces like door handles, tables, chairs, among others. Above all the WHO enjoined us to observe social distancing of at least two meters between individuals, avoid crowded places, cover our nose and mouth with the bend of our elbows when coughing or sneezing or use disposable tissues and the use of face masks. We were also enjoined to avoid frequent touching of our eyes, nose and mouth.

The plethora of guidelines by the WHO and the various Ministries of Health of member nations as well as the Centers for Disease Control in various countries were domesticated by various governments leading to closure of places of worship – notably churches and mosques, markets, schools, banning of social gatherings that exceeds certain numbers of persons, sport activities were suspended – although some countries have resumes some sporting activities behind closed doors. Above all, some countries embarked on restriction of movements. In Nigeria, the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 provided broad and specific guidelines for the

implementation of the directives by President Muhammadu Buhari on restriction of interstate movement, curfews, economic lockdown and the various categories of exemptions that are applicable.

In the face of restrictions to physical interactions, the social media space provided a safe alternative for individuals and the government to engage, disseminate information and receive feedback. However, as the world resumes from COVID-19 restrictions, the social media continues to occupy a prime place in the management of public sector organizations even in the face of government reservations and attempts at regulating the social media space to curtain the spread of fake news, hate speech and other social vices.

The social media is powerful. Its power lies in its ability to convey – on real time basis - live pictures and video recording of events as it unfolds. The livestreaming of events to a global audience is capable of mobilizing a huge population of the citizenry for positive or negative ends. The social media played important roles in the ousting of authoritarian regimes in many North African countries – popularly referred to as the Arab spring – and was instrumental in the ENDSARS campaign in Nigeria. Unfortunately, the social media have also been abused as unscrupulous people hide under its anonymity to defraud or relay false information. As the importance of social media is not lost on the general public for information engagement, its abuse in Nigeria is not lost either, especially to any keen observer of the Nigerian sociopolitical environment. These issues therefore constitute the focus of our discourse in this paper. But first, let us attempt a discussion on the major concepts in the study.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS AND REVIEWS

The discussions in this paper are woven around two major concepts, which are social media and public sector. let us start from the latter.

PUBLIC SECTOR: The Nigerian public sector, like its counterparts in other parts of the world, constitutes all those organizations and institutions whose primary purpose is to serve the interest of the public at large. The nature and scope of what constitutes the public sector has continued to expand by the day. From its traditional coverage of government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs), Commissions, Parastatals and public institutions, the public sector has expanded to include various categories of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) – both local and international, international governmental organizations as well as the media and civil society organizations.

For the purpose of this paper, it will be appropriate to delineate the scope of our focus on the term public sector. To this end, we agree with the views of Igbokwe-Ibeto, (2019) that the adjective 'public' qualifying the 'sector' sets it apart from those sectors – organizations and institutions - that belong to the private realm. Therefore, the focus of our paper is on those economic, social and service units that are government owned and controlled. It excludes other aspects of our earlier delineations of the term public sector that includes Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) – both local and international, international governmental organizations as well as the media and civil society organizations.

All organizations – whether they are in the realm of the public or private sector – exist to meet one human need or the other. This could be in the form of providing tangible goods or intangible goods known as services. Thus, while the provision of food, clothing and shelter can be seen as essential goods which also constitute the crux of the basic necessities of man, unseen commodities like education, healthcare, financial advisory services, security etc. are within the realm of essential services. Whatever be the nature of the organizational goals and objectives, it can only be achieved through the efforts and contributions of its workforce working individually and or as a team in the coordination and harnessing of the organizational material resources for that purpose.

SOCIAL MEDIA: Social media consist of a series of internet enabled user applications that allows handlers to connect, share information and interact irrespective of the physical distance between or among them. These applications can be installed on a variety of devices like phones (Android, IOS, etc.), computers (laptop, desktop, palmtop, etc.) among other electronic gadgets or devices. According to Mohammed (2021), the social media comprises of computer-based technologies for easy communication, social engagement, interaction and collaboration. In the views of Hopkins (2017), the social media applications are digitally-mediated communication and data sharing software that enable users to create and share, view, comment and issue instant feedback on contents in virtual public network that – to a large extent – encourages user anonymity in a virtual global community. Communication over the social media could be on the basis of one-to-many, one-to-one, and/or many-to-many communications.

It is often said that the internet has made the world a global community but the social media has made it even smaller. Its role in the management of information during the COVID-19 and post COVID-19 lockdown era both nationally and globally is not only commendable but helped to solidify its importance and role in a new world order. At the outbreak of the pandemic, the social media was utilized to inform the citizens of the first Coronavirus victim in Nigeria – an Italian.

This is as a result of the fact that a good number of Nigerians have access to social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and various websites of relevant government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs). It was therefore, easy to get information

across to a vast majority of the people easier, cheaper and faster. Subsequently, healthcare agencies such as the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC) updated the masses on the number of cases that are positive, fatal or have recovered in Nigeria through these social media platforms. This gave Nigerian citizens a better chance to be fully prepared for COVID-19; as opposed to the period of the Influenza pandemic in which there was limited news on the virus when it came to Nigeria.

At the time of the Influenza, the colonial government of Nigeria was only able to curtail it in parts of Lagos by disinfecting houses; however, limitations in the spread of information prompted the faster spread of the disease to other parts of the country (Adebowale, 2020). NCDC is the country's national public health institute with the mandate to lead the preparedness, detection and response to infectious diseases outbreak. The agency was formally signed into law in November 2018 by the president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari. The mission of the agency is to protect the health of Nigerians through evidence based prevention, integrated diseases surveillance and response activities and they serve as a body that disseminates information to the citizens (NCDC, 2020).

However, in this period of COVID-19 pandemic, it is through the traditional and social media that the government passes across updates on the state of the country's state of health as regards the spread of the flu. Accordingly, NCDC platforms on Twitter and Facebook are updated from time to time. Also, service providers such as MTN have provided free Internet access to the websites of Health Organizations such as the NCDC, Federal Ministry of Health, World Health Organization and the Presidential Task Force. The NCDC also sends daily updates to the people through SMS so that citizens would be properly equipped with whatever information they might need to combat the virus. However, despite the importance of the social media in terms of its strengths and opportunities, it poses some weaknesses that constitute potent threats to the peace and stability of the populace as people hide under the cover of social media anonymity to commit varying crimes, disinformation and the spread of fake news and hate speech.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE SEARCH FOR AN ACCEPTABLE BALANCE BETWEEN INFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION

The inherent dangers in the misuse of the social media are enormous. Like a wildfire, fake news on social media can travel with the speed of light with devastating consequences on individuals and the society at large. In Nigeria, the upper legislative chamber (The Senate) in 2019 re-introduced a bill to regulate the use of social media in the country. The bill titled; 'Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations Bill 2019' was sponsored by Senator Mohammed Sani Musa representing Niger State East Senatorial District. Before the 2019 attempt, Senator Ibn Bala Na'Allah had in 2015 sponsored a Bill described as an Act to Prohibit Frivolous Petitions and other Matters Connected therewith, which was rejected by majority of Nigerians. Though the Senate's reason for the rejection was that, according to its committee on Judiciary, Human Rights and Legal Matters, most of the provisions of the bill already existed in other extant laws of the federation.

Just like the 2015 attempt, the 2019 bill allegedly seeks to protect individuals against the transmission of falsehood as statements of fact that are capable of affecting the security, public safety, health and public tranquility of the Nigerian polity. Promoters pf the social media regulation also sought to prohibit the transmission of information that are capable of affecting Nigeria's external relations, incite feeling of enmity among Nigerians, influences the outcome of an election, cause disaffection among the different segment of the Nigerian society, engender hatred between persons and groups or diminish public confidence in the performance of duties by the government (Mohammed, 2021). Despite harsh criticisms from many quarters, the government is determined to regulate and control the use and misuse of the social media in order to 'sanitize' the media space.

For many in Nigeria presently, the social media according to Utomi, (2020) means different things to different people. To the youths in Nigeria, the social media is a positive force for good governance and governance accountability. The success of the 2020 ENDSARS campaign that was orchestrated and promoted through the social media forced the government at the center and at various states to accede to the demands of the protesters to varying degrees. The federal government – through the Inspector General of Police – disbanded the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, the President was forced to address the nation and the Vice President through the National Economic Council mandated state governments to set up judicial panels of inquiry. This is a pointer to the positive impact of social media as a tool for stakeholder engagement, communication, advocacy, community mass mobilization and coordination of volunteer activities with the aim of solving common problems.

Also, to some others, the social media is a marketplace for business and economic activities. Many budding entrepreneurs utilize space to advertise, market and sell their products and services; promote their brands and earn a decent living. On the flip side, unscrupulous elements utilize the opportunities that the social media provides to defraud unsuspecting individuals and groups. The alarming case of internet fraud (yahoo-yahoo) – that Nigerians is sadly notorious for – is also perpetrated using the social media. The spread of fake news and hate speech is also common on social media. In many countries of the world, social media companies have been criticized or even sued for their inability to control the activities of the members of the online communities they create and manage.

While the Nigerian government under President Muhammadu Buhari acknowledges the fact that the social media aids socioeconomic and political discussions across the globe, it has however, argued persistently that just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole country sides with devastating consequences to lives and properties, even so, an uncontrolled use of the social media serves but to destroy (Utomi, 2020). The Nigerian government on the 4th of June 2021 announced the ban on Twitter in the Nigeria social media space. The ban follows the action of Twitter to delete a tweet made by the President – Muhammadu Buhari – where he warned trouble makers in the country to desist from their actions or be treated 'in the language they understand.' The tweet reads as follows,

> *"Many of those misbehaving today are too young to be aware of the destruction and loss of lives that occurred during the Biafra war. Those of us in the fields for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand."*

Following series of complaints by people who feel that the tweet is a threat against a particular section of the country and petitions to twitter, the tweet was deleted. Defending their action, twitter Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Jack Dorsey, said that the tweet violated their rules. Twitter was not the only media platform that deleted president Buhari's speech, Facebook also did. In a statement issued on its platform, Facebook said that it has removed a post from President Buhari's Facebook page for violating community standards against inciting violence in line with their global policies. The reason for the twitter ban by the Nigerian government, according to the Minister for Information and Culture – Alhaji Lai Mohammed – was that the microblogging site have availed its platform to trouble makers and secessionist agitators to spread fake news and incite the public against the Nigerian state. Citing a specific example, the Federal Minister accused twitter of not deleting the series of inciting tweets by Nnamdi Kanu – leader of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) during the ENDSARS protests that led to the death of security agents and the destruction of public and private properties.

Many prominent Nigerians have expressed their displeasure over the policy. Nobel Laureate Prof. Wole Soyinka who was among the prominent Nigerians that criticized the ban described it as "dictatorial spasm" and an action "unbecoming of a democratically elected president." Also the Former Senate President, Bukola Saraki, said that the suspension should not be in place for "a nation with a vibrant youthful population for whom twitter is a source of their income and livelihood." In like manner, the Civic-tech non-profit organization BudgIT said the action is "not just an attack on democracy but also an attempt to shut down citizens' voices. Adding to the voices of dissent, a senior lawyer and human rights activist, Femi Falana, said that the twitter ban was part of the Buhari government's plan to gag the media.

Despite the loud criticisms, the government have stuck to its guns in insisting on the need to regulate the activities of individuals and groups on the social media space. It however appears that the search for an acceptable balance between information and misinformation on the social media is still elusive in view of the fact that even the government have been caught to have misinformed the public through the social media. After the events of October 20, 2020 at the Lekki toll gate, where the Nigerian army was accused of shooting and killing unarmed protesters, the initial response from the army was an outright denial that its men were not at the Lekki toll gate. After series of evidence including live videos obtained from the scene of the incident and posted on social media, the army recanted and admitted that its men were at the scene. The raging controversy have been whether or not there was a MASSACRE of innocent citizens by the Nigerian army. While the army and the Nigerian government insisted that the allegation of a massacre is unfounded and false, many individuals and civil society organizations believed that there was indeed a massacre. The report of the Lagos state Judicial panel to the effect that the events of the night of October 20, 2020 at the Lekki toll gate was indeed, a massacre is a pointer to the fact that even the government is liable to falsehood on the social media.

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD (RECOMMENDATIONS)

Public sector information management can no longer remain the same with the advent of technology and the social media. The potentials of the social media as a positive tool of civilization is also not in doubt. What is however debatable is the question of how best to apply the necessary brakes in the speed moving train of information dissemination in a digital world where geographical barriers are increasingly being diminished. To address this issue, the following recommendations are proffered.

1. Government should be up and doing with information dissemination in order to eliminate the potential channels for grapevine sources that breeds rumor mongering, fake news and misinformation.
2. There should be increased transparency and accountability on the part of the government and the public sector to ensure good governance. In the face of information revolution aided by the social media, official secrecy prevalent in public bureaucracies should be jettisoned to avoid the possibilities of information leakage and spread of falsehood.
3. Also, social media companies should step up their game in sanitizing their online communities for better accountability, checkmate fraud and prevent issues of cyber bullying and hate speech.

4. Finally, there should be appropriate mechanisms to sanction defaulters. To this end, social media organizations should collaborate with government agencies in their countries of operation to identify and punish those who take advantage of the social media to perpetrate fraud and other forms of misinformation.

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