

The nexus between the Federal Government of Nigeria, social media and peaceful coexistence: A critical review

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Abstract: Social media has become a phenomenon that is changing all spheres of life tremendously. It is affecting the peaceful coexistence of people in the society both positively and negatively. Almost every government throughout the world is reacting in one way or the other to this influence, especially the perceived adverse influence of social media on the peaceful coexistence of people in the society. This paper aims at exploring the interplay between the Federal Government of Nigeria and social media in relation to the peaceful coexistence of people in the country. Public Sphere Theory is used as the theoretical framework. The paper is a follow-up to a study on how Baptist pastors in the Ibadan metropolis are using social media in conflict resolution and promotion of peaceful coexistence among members of their church. It further reviews some existing literatures on the subject matter where the history of social media in Nigeria and some specific effects of social media in relation to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria are explored before exploring the interplay. Some recommendations are given to the Federal Government of Nigeria at the end of the paper. The paper concludes by warning the Federal Government of Nigerian and other governments throughout the world in regulating the use of social media so that the original purpose of the regulation will not be defeated.

Keywords: Peaceful coexistence, Regulating the use of social media, Social media, The Federal Government of Nigeria, The Nigerian society

1. Introduction

As a phenomenon that is changing all spheres of life tremendously, social media is affecting the peaceful coexistence of people in the society both positively and negatively. Almost every government worldwide is reacting in one way or the other to this influence, especially the perceived adverse influence of social media on the peaceful coexistence of people in the society. This paper aims at exploring the interplay between the Federal Government of Nigeria and social media in relation to the peaceful coexistence of people in the country. Public Sphere Theory is used as the study's theoretical framework. The history of social media in Nigeria is explored before exploring the interplay. The paper is a spin-off of a study on how Baptist pastors in the Ibadan metropolis are using social media to mediate in conflict resolution and promotion of peaceful coexistence among members of their church. The paper deliberately does not attempt to define social media or peaceful coexistence because the two terms have been defined by this researcher in another paper (Afolaranmi, 2023: 94-95). In that paper, Afolaranmi (2023:94) cited McFarland and Ployhart (2015:1655) who defined social media simply as "digital Web 2.0 platforms that facilitate information sharing, user-created content, and collaboration across people." Also, Afolaranmi (2023: 94-95) gave some explanations as given by other scholars on peaceful coexistence. Besides, numerous scholars have provided diverse meanings for

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the terms in their previous works. Some recommendations are given to the Federal Government of Nigeria at the end of the paper.

2. Theoretical framework

The main theory used for this study is Public Sphere Theory. Public sphere theory is one of the theories that can be used as a contextual framework for social media. This theory was created in the 18th century but modernized by Jürgen Habermas, a critical theorist and German sociologist (“Jürgen Habermas and the Public Sphere.”). In the words of Hauser (1999: 61), public sphere is “a discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them.” It is also viewed as various ways where people can liberally “express, participate, communicate and share their understanding, ideas and information that involve political, social issues and other diverse things that affect their social coexistence; peace and conflicts inclusive” (Firchow, et al., 2017:5). The platforms for this information sharing can be through the traditional media, parliament houses, clubhouses, coffee or beer joints, saloon places, marketplaces, and even religious places like churches and mosques. However, with the advent and constant evolution of information and communication technologies, the character of Habermas’ public sphere theory has metamorphosed from a simple physical, locational platform to a more advanced, cyber-based but complex communication space (Khan, Gilani & Nawaz, 2012). Social media, in particular, have made this advanced change possible.

3. History of social media in Nigeria

The advent and growth of social media have been powered by the human desire to communicate with one another and advance in digital technology. The origin of social media generally is traced to the 1980s and the Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) when there was a sort of meeting room online that permitted people to copy games and other files and to send messages to other users (Biały, 2017). The social feature of this interaction was so distinct, nonetheless, the exchange was somewhat restricted and not fast due to technological explanations (Biały (2017). In the views of Onifade, Olomu, Ajao, Atoyebi and Ilevbare (2018), Today’s social networking sites, is said to have been spawned under the AOL (America Online) umbrella. It was referred to as “Internet before the Internet”, in 1995, Classmates.com which today has about 57million registered users was created and it could be considered as the first to meet the modern definition of social media. After this, was the advent of Six Degrees and Asian Avenue, created in 1997, BlackPlanet created in 1999, [and] MiGente [created in] 2000. Friendster was launched in 2002 followed by LinkedIn and MySpace in 2003 and LinkedIn has over 297 million users today.

In the words of Amodu (2017: 7), social media tools “are increasingly creating e-communities and e-societies that transcend geographical boundaries and de-territorializes nation-states.” The fact that social media needs little training and is not capital intensive makes it widely acceptable (Monjok, Ulasi & Lee, 2019: 46). Other reasons for the acceptability and popularity of social media are “various target audiences, global reach, and the unprecedented speed of information flow” (Biały, 2017). Comparing the emergence and acceptance of social media to other means of communication, Onifade et al. (2018) gave this information: “It took 38 years for 50 million people to have access to radio, 13 years for television and 4 years for the Internet to attract the same number of users. This only took a period of 12-months for Facebook to gain 200 million users.” As asserted by Wilkinson (2021), there were roughly 4.2 billion people that actively used social media in 2020. This has made social media users worldwide on a daily average to be online for almost 145 minutes. In another assertion that corroborated the above figures,

In 2020, 490 million new users joined social media, a growth rate of 13.2%. On average, users have accounts on eight different platforms and spend two-and-a-half hours per day on social media. As a result, social media increasingly shapes political and social interactions and, indeed, people’s perceptions of reality (Lanz, et al., 2021).

Olasinde (2014: 56) asserted that the emergence and acceptability of social media have made the contemporary generation to be able to easily get any form of information they desire through the Internet, especially social media. The advent of social media has greatly transformed how people communicate

worldwide (White, Tella & Ampofo, 2016: 3). This is against the backdrop that the evolution of social media has really affected in diverse ways how “people, communities, and organizations communicate and interact” (Orth, Andipatin, Mukumbang and van Wyk, 2020). Biały (2017) corroborated this by saying:

The appearance of social media offered Internet users an unprecedented opportunity to connect with other people. The exchange of memories, experiences, opinions, views and agendas became easy and—over time—very cheap. Suddenly, one could find former classmates and reestablish regular contact and also discover new “friends” in dynamically growing social networks. And these “friends” could come from any part of the globe with Internet access, which means from almost all over the world.

Plaisime, Robertson-James, Mejia, Núñez, Wolf and Reels (2020: 1) also supported this by saying, “Social media facilitates the creative display of information, while simultaneously influencing, motivating, and engaging individuals on important health issues.”

According to Lim (2017: 23), currently, in the world, “four out of five people who have access to the Internet use social media.” In the recent decade, according to Hollenbaugh (2019: 1), partly because of the virtually worldwide availability and the use of many social media, using the Internet has transformed from “more consumption of information to producing and sharing one’s own information.”. Some alluded to the fact that in the United States, 90 per cent of adults aged 18 to 29 years were using at least one social media site in 2019. Additionally, young adults characterize the major demographic of users on most of the major social media platforms, like Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube, and Twitter (Hruska & Maresova, 2020: 27).

However, coming to Nigeria, Nzewi (2021) asserted that “Toady’s Nigeria Youths spend hours surfing the net, engaging themselves in chatting and socializing on different social networking sites.” Against the backdrop of the growing popularity of social media, Hussain, Loan and Yaseen (2017: 73) have averred that the world is experiencing what they termed “the social media revolution.” Like any other rendered service, Onifade et al. (2018) noted,

Using social media also requires that users agree to certain terms and conditions (also called T&C or terms of service). These are rules and clauses which users must agree on, in order to use a service; these terms are usually binding to two parties (organisation and users). It includes a list of provisions such as a disclaimer of liability (owner takes no responsibility for any damages a user receives as a result of use), a licence of the copyright or agreement clause.

Morah, Ekwonchi and Chiahah (2019) asserted that the usage of social media is increasing in acceptance in Nigeria every day. Osolase (2021) asserted that “about 15.8% of the population of Nigeria is active on social media platforms.” Social media is indeed playing a significant role in contemporary Nigerian society (Wow Effect Communications, 2018). In line with an online source (Export.gov), “Nigeria is ranked number 7 for internet users globally. In 2018, about 22.4 million (11.2%) Nigerians were active Facebook users each month, Twitter ranked second with 8.35%.... The popularity of social media in Nigeria increases with mobile penetration and as data costs fall” (Export.gov). According to Thoms (2021) in a recent report, “The main social media platforms in Nigeria are WhatsApp and Facebook.”

4. Some impacts of social media in relation to peaceful coexistence in Nigeria

There have been many books and articles on the influence of social media (both positive and negative) on the society generally and specifically on various groups of people in the society (Ononogbu & Chiroma, 2018). Nonetheless, there are seven areas that social media have had an impact on the world as highlighted in an online source (“What Is the Major Impact of Social Media?”). These areas are politics, society, commerce, the world of work, moral challenges, personal relationships, and most especially information dissemination (“What Is the Major Impact of Social Media?”). While Chukwuere (2020: 4) stated that “building a presence on social media is becoming an essential part of humans,” the researcher also opined that “the application of social media platforms can assist in managing any lack of presence.” Nigeria Internet Registration Association (NiRA) (2018) precisely itemized many social platforms that social media make available for people, especially the youth. These include:

1. Great communication tools to connect with loved ones and old friends irrespective of locations.
2. Access to positive and free information being shared on Social Media.

3. Opportunities to promote their businesses to a larger and wider audience.
4. Social Capital.
5. An avenue to contribute to emotional wellbeing of others by offering positive advices.
6. Opportunities to launch businesses online.
7. Opportunities to market businesses online at little or no cost.
8. Real time sharing of information for businesses through paid and unpaid advertising (Nigeria Internet Registration Association [NiRA], 2018).

While Denskus (2019: 1) thought that “there is no singular, universal, or unilateral way in which social media has been contributing to peacebuilding,” Aslam (2016) argued that social media networks are “rapidly rewriting the principles and protocols of war and conflict reporting.” This is against the backdrop as Tarmaeva and Narchuk (2020: 81) asserted, “Conflicts are an integral part of communication in social media.” The growth of technological tools has changed the information space around conflict by providing an increasing number of people with the instruments to record and share their experiences with other people in the world (Widmer & Grossenbacher, 2019). Esberg and Mikulaschek (2021) have identified and explained four areas where social media, in particular, is influencing conflict dynamics. These areas are: “incitement to violence; the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda; recruitment into armed groups; and the growing role of social media to suppress opposition.” It was the opinion of Nonnecke, Perez de Acha, Choi, Crittenden, Gutierrez Cortes, Martin Del Campo and Miranda-Villanueva (2022: 3) that “While social media platforms hold great promise for promoting an inclusive public sphere, they are simultaneously susceptible to nefarious manipulation, including rampant harassment and echo chambers that silence political debates and amplify the spread of disinformation.” Furthermore, Achkar (2021) has made a distinction between misinformation and disinformation. While misinformation is “when false or out-of context information or facts are shared and reported as truth,” disinformation, in contrast, is “the deliberate fabrication of information designed for nefarious purposes.”

There have been arguments about whether social media is good or bad or neutral. This is against the backdrop that social media “can be used for social good, such as overturning oppressive regimes or bringing income inequality to the forefront of national and international discussions. At the same time, there will always be those who leverage technology in ways that were unintended by the designers” (Hemsley et al., 2018: 3). In support of this, as cited by this researcher in another paper (Afolaranmi, 2023: 96), Lunga (2020) chronicled some illustrations of activities on Twitter and Facebook that demonstrated the way social media is a “place for both good and destructive conflict resolution.” These illustrations, as made by Lunga (2020), include “the Arab Spring (2011), #BlackLivesMatter (2013), #BringBackOurGirls (2014) and #MeToo (2017), among others.”

Specifically, social media has had a great influence on the peaceful coexistence of people in Nigeria. This researcher has referred to the most recent one as the #EndSARS which almost paralysed the country in 2020 (Afolaranmi, 2023: 96). This was a protest against Police brutality in Nigeria that initially started on Twitter and then spread to many print and social media platforms.

5. The Federal Government of Nigeria and social media in relation to peaceful coexistence

One of the respondents in the conducted interview expressed apprehension about the way the Federal Government of Nigeria is treating the use of social media, particularly the planned guideline of using social media in the nation (David Hambolu, personal communication, June 3, 2021). Remarkably, the Federal Government of Nigeria placed a ban on the use of Twitter the second day that this respondent gave this apprehension by issuing a press statement to ban the use of Twitter in Nigeria on the 4th of June 2021. This action of the government is a big constraint to users of social media in Nigeria. The action was considered “an unlawful restriction on freedom of expression and other freedoms exercised online” by the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law. So, the centre counselled the Federal Government of Nigeria to “revoke the directive in line with its international obligations and adopt measures to foster digital freedoms in consultation with all stakeholders.” In the words of Obiaje (2021), the ban is an “erosion of freedom of information”, and “the current Federal Government of Nigeria is bent on circumventing the right to free speech in the country.”

However, regulating social media is not something that only the Federal Government of Nigeria does. Mohammed (2021) corroborated this: "Despite the [positive impacts] of the social media, there have been several agitations for its regulation not just by individuals, but also by governments around the world." Paul (2019) chronicled it thus:

The social media restriction discussion has been going on for a while [in Nigeria]. A version tagged "F frivolous Petitions (Prohibition) Bill 2015" aka Social Media Bill, was introduced in 2016 during the 8th National Assembly but got the axe as it met heated protests.

For 2019, Nigerians got the first whiff when President Muhammadu Buhari declined to sign the Digital Rights Bill on the grounds that it "covers too many technical subjects and fails to address any of them extensively."

The Digital Rights Bill was supposed to be one that protected the fundamental rights of Nigerians on the Internet and ensured their safety and well being.

Another ominous sign was a part of the president's independence day speech, which seemingly foretold plans of impending Internet censorship.

In a recent study, Palmieri-Branco (2021: 47) concluded that

Ultimately, the evolving role of social media in the context of protest movements invites policymakers and institutions to question the potential benefits and consequences of the democratization of the internet. On the one hand, this tool has expanded transparency in the context of corruption and human security, while also broadening the way individuals communicate with each other on a global scale. On the other, it has proven to be vulnerable to manipulation and censorship, which counteracts some of said benefits. In a world becoming more interconnected with every new technological advancement, the evolution of digital media will become a battleground for governments and privacy advocates alike. It will be important to include the critical role social media platforms play in the fight against oppression and in the movement for equality and freedom.

Nonetheless, one would wonder why a tool that has enabled "...both the government and the governed to express their minds about the issues that affect the society" (Babaleye, Ibitoye, & Odorume, 2020) would become something that the government would want to suppress. Recently, Barber'a, et al. (2021) provided a global analysis of the way social media is been use by leaders worldwide to their advantage, especially during social unrest. The researchers recognized the value of social media by government officers as "a tool for digital diplomacy, to broadcast messages and issue rapid responses to crises, and to manipulate the political and media agenda."

Mohammed (2021) explained some reasons for the possible regulation of the use of social media, not only by the Federal Government of Nigeria but also by other governments throughout the world. These reasons are:

- i. defamation activities by individuals on social media,
- ii. unimaginable disruption of government activities,
- iii. proliferations of fake and unverified news,
- iv. citizen journalism, and
- v. hate speeches.

Nzewi (2021) gave another argument in favour of the Federal Government of Nigeria that "...just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countrysides and devastates crops, even so, uncontrolled use of the social media serves but to destroy." Against this backdrop, Ali (2021: 43) has recommended "...strict action and, especially regulation ... when it comes to the use of social media as a tool..."

Despite all these reasons and recommendations for a possible regulation by any government, Osuigwe (2019) thought that self-regulation on the part of Internet platform companies would be most effective. This self-regulation "...involves setting standards of appropriate codes of behaviour and content by and for the operators of social media platforms that are necessary to support freedom of expression and right to access of information and that stipulates how those behaviours will be monitored and enforced" (Osuigwe, 2019). It was the opinion of Nzewi (2021) that stakeholders like libraries should be involved in a sort of self-regulation by "...widely teaching the principles of literacy and media literacy." Reacting to the ban of Twitter in Nigeria, Osolase (2021) thought, "Despite the anger that has been generated from both sides leading to the suspension of the operations of Twitter by the Federal Government of Nigeria, it is best for all issues to be resolved amicably, so that the suspension can be lifted and all issues resolved amicably."

In a similar scenario in India, another microblogging app known as “Koo” was launched in March 2020 when the Indian government had a disagreement with Twitter (“Koo, Home-Grown Social Media App: All You Need To Know”). The new app has gained popularity since then in India and throughout the world, as it has already had over 4.7 million users as of 16 March 2021 (Singh, Jain, Jain, Jain, Sehgal & Kumaraguru, 2021). Just recently, the app was launched officially in Nigeria (Umeh, 2021). It was opined that this new app may overtake other social networks and instant messaging apps because of the possibility of using local dialects as it has started with Indian dialects (“Koo, Home-Grown Social Media App: All You Need To Know”). However, with the lifting of the ban on Twitter in Nigeria, it is unlikely that Koo may outsmart Twitter in Nigeria.

Even though the city of Ibadan which was used for this research as the case study is a metropolitan city, some interviewed people claimed that the rural areas of some parts of Nigeria is a problem to using social media to promote peaceful coexistence. This is against the backdrop of lack of basic social amenities in most of these rural areas. These interviewed people probably were talking about the suburb areas of Ibadan city. Some scholars had stated that many rural places in Nigeria do not have elementary social facilities, with “poverty...more obvious in [these] rural areas” (Johnson & Ifeoma, 2018; Adojo & Eugene, 2020). The provision of basic social amenities is a major responsibility of the Federal Government of Nigeria. Consequently, to have access to the Internet and other technological tools is not easy in these rural and suburban parts, and people in such areas are virtually abandoned in the Internet growth in the world. Certainly, this will influence the use of social media in the promotion of peaceful coexistence among such ignored persons.

Closely related to the lack of basic social amenities in Nigeria is the below standard of living among many Nigerians. This is another challenge for the use of social media for mediative dialogue. This is corroborated in that with “seven in ten Nigerians live off no more than USD 1.25 per day poverty is probably the biggest challenge [in Nigeria]” (“A Practical Guide to the Way of Life in Nigeria”). This is having negative influence on most people to the point that these people are finding it difficult to have personal computers or devices that are Internet-enabled talk less of getting Internet data to have access to social media.

6. Contributions to the body of knowledge

This paper contributes to the body of knowledge by enumerating the positive use of social media. It also attempts to correct the excesses of the Federal Government of Nigerian in regulating the use of social media. Likewise, the paper cautions the society about the misuse of the social media.

7. The recommendations

Against the backdrop of the above, these recommendations are made for the Federal Government of Nigeria:

1. The government should do everything possible to combat the issue of inconsistent power supply by changing old apparatuses with new good ones. There should be appropriate and adequate maintenances of electrical power gadgets. Anticorruption bodies should take a strict and prompt action to curb the challenge of corruption and mismanagement of funds earmarked for power sector improvement.
2. The government should make provision for a society that is easy to explore other avenues of generation of power like solar and nuclear power plants. There should be training and re-training of staff of energy establishments, immediate imbursement of remunerations of people working in energy corporations, invention of strategies and active monitoring and regulation of energy establishments by the related governmental bodies with appropriate follow-up. Provision of enough transformers to areas where such are required should be made to control congestion.
3. Internet access should be made accessible and inexpensive by the government and Internet service providers. This will inspire many people to gain access to the Internet. Internet service providers should upgrade their services and make the Internet work more flawlessly.
4. The government should make provision for a society where people will be able to use social media with moderate control. Total banning of the use of Twitter in Nigeria recently and other numerous

efforts of the Federal Government of Nigeria to control the use of social media are discouraging using social media. Freedom of expression as rooted in the constitution of Nigeria should be sustained.

5. The government should improve people's standard of living, not only in urban settings but also and most especially in rural settings. If this is done, people will be motivated to have Internet-enabled devices, buy Internet data to access the Internet and be involved joyfully in using social media.
6. Concerned government regulatory bodies should enforce rules that will guide against fake and unverified news. Providers of online social network services and instant messaging should also put measures to control the spread of fake and unverified news through their services. This will make using social media have some confidentiality and credibility.

8. Area of further research

Some areas of further research were discovered in the course of this study. However, one that stands out in relation to the Federal Government of Nigeria is the need to research how the government and its ministries, parastatals and agencies can use social media to curb the wave of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping and other social vices that have become rampant in many parts of Nigeria.

9. Conclusion

Regulating the use of social media by the Federal Government of Nigerian and other governments throughout the world is a welcome development. This will curb the excesses in the use of the new media. However, governments should do this regulation with caution so as not to defeat its purpose.

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