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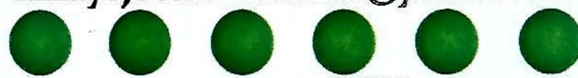

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THE #ENDSARS PROTESTS AND THE INTERNET'S ROLE AS A CATALYST FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL CHANGE: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE EMMANCIPATORY MEDIA THEORY

By

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ABSTRACT

The #EndSARs protests were a series of demonstrations that occurred throughout Nigeria in 2020 in reaction to perceived cases of police brutality. Their raison d´être was later expanded to include demands for good governance. Accompanied by solidarity protests among the Nigerian diaspora and facilitated by a groundswell of apparent popular support among the younger generation, the protests were characterised by levels of hashtag activism and viral social-media discussion comparable to the #BlackLivesMatter and the #TareAKnee movements, which drew attention to racism in the United States and sports respectively. Against the backdrop of the seemingly pivotal role played by the Internet in these protests, this essay analyses tweets, Facebook posts and Instagram comments from a select group of activists and members of online communities in connection with the #EndSARs protects. These messages, purposively selected to include those that articulated the subject's perception of the role of the Internet in the protests, provide a text for a qualitative analysis of the claims of the Emancipatory Media Theory in the context of #EndSARs. The findings reveal a mixed bag of reactions; exhilaration at the logistical and fundraising opportunities provided by social media and despondency at the organisers' inability to use the Internet and the protests to catalyse the real-world changes they so desperately craved. The new media apparently may be quite useful as tools for airing alternative views. Still, there is no guarantee that, in the absence of a confluence of other factors, they will necessarily achieve the emancipatory ideals of their users. Scholars may therefore wish to think of the media as ventilatory rather than as emancipatory.

Sub-theme: Political Communication in Nigeria in the Digital Age

Introduction

On October 8, 2020, nationwide protests began in Nigeria "after weeks of outrage and anger with videos and pictures showing police brutality, harassment and extortion" (Wikipedia, 2020, n.p.). This scenario was preceded a week earlier by an online video showing an officer of Nigeria's Special Anti-Robbery Squad shooting a young Nigerian in front of Wetland Hotel, Ughelli, Delta State (Aljazeera News, 2020a). Just as #EndSARs began to trend on Twitter, another report emerged of the killing by a SARS officer of a 20-year-old musician from Rivers State named Daniel Chibuike, also known as Sleek (Lambo, 2020). These incidents, however, were merely the last precipitants of the #EndSARS protests. Prior to these events, a 2016 report by Amnesty International had indicted SARS, alleging that the squad was responsible for acts of cruelty, torture, extortion, and a litany of other human rights abuses (Amnesty

International, 2016). Furthermore, a 2020 publication by the same human rights organisation documented 82 cases of abuses and summary executions carried out by SARS between January 2017 and 2020 (Amnesty International, 2020). The hashtag EndSARS, then, became a rallying cry for a social movement aimed at bringing an end to decades of perceived police brutality and other socio-political vices in Nigeria.

#EndSARS stands as just one example within a broader movement that uses hashtags to direct attention to social and political causes. Beginning with the Occupy Wall Street movement (during which hashtag activism came into popular use), hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #TakeAKnee, #BringBackOurGirls, #ThisFlag, and #RhodesMustFall have sought to focus attention on racism, impunity, human rights abuse, gender-based injustices, often garnering mainstream media coverage in the process. However, critics have argued that simply bringing attention to a cause remains a vague and inconclusive political goal. As Carr (2012, p. 46) notes: "Another week, another hashtag, and with it, a question about what is being accomplished."

On the other hand, the media – and, in particular, the new media – are often touted as possible game changers in the perennial struggle against repressive regimes and official censorship (Potts, 2013; Wolff, 2015; Qiu, 2004; Noveck, 2009; Breuer and Groshek (2014). The Internet is sometimes hailed for its non-hierarchical nature and the fact that it has no traditional gatekeepers (Straubhaar *et al.*, 2014; Logan, 2016). In particular, "one branch of critical theory," McQuail (2010, p. 182) notes, has come "to espouse the promise of the… "new media', especially because of the potential for small-scale grassroots communication in channels independent from dominant mass media." This promise is encapsulated in what McQuail (2010, p. 183) calls the "emancipatory media theory," the trajectory of which tends to emphasise the Internet's significance in socio-political affairs. Against the backdrop of the seemingly pivotal role played by the Internet in the #EndSARS protests and other movements, the aim of this essay is to analyse the perceived efficacy of the Internet, and social media in particular, as a tool for socio-political change in the Nigerian context. The researchers hope thereby to draw lessons on the emancipatory media theory.

Theoretical Framework

The emancipatory media theory owes its origins to neo-Marxist scholarship and, in particular, to the critical studies tradition popularised by the Frankfurt School theoreticians Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm and Max Horkheimer. Horkheimer, for instance, described any theory as critical insofar as it seeks "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (quoted in Ritzer, 2008, pp. 569). Furthermore, emancipatory media thinking bears the influences of the Italian Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci, who criticised the media as tools of hegemony, and the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who described the media's role in the formation of public opinion through what he called "the public sphere" (McNair, 2011, pp. 17, 56).

As noted by Millan (2019, n.p.), the Habermasian concept of emancipatory communication presupposes "the grassroots creation of alternatives to existing media and communication infrastructure, whether analogue or digital." According to McQuail (2010, p. 183), media that could be termed emancipatory "include those serving a political cause, ranging from female emancipation to the overthrow of oppressive or bourgeois regimes… and grassroots micro-media in developing countries or situations of authoritarian rule or foreign occupation." Similarly, Downing (2000) comments on the ability of the media to operate positively in the critical tradition, pointing to alternative publications such as samizdat in the former Soviet Union. These outlets, according to Downing, serve two primary functions: (a) expressing opposition vertically from subordinate quarters directly at the power structure and its behaviour and (b) building support, solidarity and networks of resistance laterally against policies. Quite insightfully, such "rebellious communication" is often "stimulated by" and also "generates new social movements" and tends to "break someone's rules, although rarely all of them in

every respect."

The terms "emancipatory use of the media" and "emancipatory media theory" were, however, first employed by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who used the word "emancipatory" to contrast with what he defined as the "repressive" use of the media (Watson & Hill, 2012, p. 91). According to Enzensberger (1985, n.p.), the emancipatory media theory assumes the following:

> decentralized programme (as opposed to the repressive mode of a centrally controlled programme); each receiver a potential transmitter as opposed to one transmitter, many receivers); mobilization of the masses (as opposed to immobilization of isolated individuals); interaction of those involved, and feedback (as opposed to passive consumer behaviour); a political learning process (as opposed to depoliticization); and collective production, social control by self-organisation (as opposed to production by specialists, control by property owners or bureaucracy.

In summary, the emancipatory media theory construes the media not just as an effective tool for – to use a Marxist phraseology – empowering the disempowered, but ultimately helping them, in that process, to get rid of "their chains" (Marx and Engels, 2002).

Hashtag Activism, Social Media, and the Internet's Role in Catalyzing Change: A Review of Literature

The use of Twitter's hashtags for Internet activism is almost as old as Twitter and microblogging. The use of these metadata tags has become very common as a means of cross-referencing content and thus sharing a topic, theme or meme (Castells, 2015). Existing literature examining the relationship between Twitter and political protests has yielded important insights into how the social media platform has been used in combination with on-the-ground activist practices to drive offline protests (Theocharis *et al.*, 2015). However, much of the extant literature tends to focus on cases in the advanced democracies of the Western world, leaving a gap in the scholarly understanding of Internet-mediated protest mobilisation in the Global South (Peña-López *et al.*, 2014; Tremayne, 2014). This essay contributes to the scholarly debate about the role of the Internet as a facilitator of socio-political change by exploring the perceived efficacy of social media in the #EndSARS protests. The current research focuses principally on two questions: First, what were the ultimate expectations of the activists involved in #EndSARS in terms of what the Internet could help them achieve? Second, what were their post-protest perceptions about the effectiveness of the Internet in helping them achieve the ultimate goals of the protest?

These questions are relevant because when major social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter emerged, "there was profound enthusiasm about the role they could play in facilitating democratic change" (Sinpeng, 2021, p. 194). The notion that these platforms are technologies of liberation rests on the assumption that social media permits anybody to organise cheaply and rapidly for a cause, connect to others on a global scale, and mobilise supporters (Diamond & Plattner, 2014). The premise is that social media platforms can increase civic political participation, activate previously inactive citizens, challenge vested political interests, and keep governments accountable for their actions. Social media's affordability, ubiquity, high speed, ease of use, and interactivity seem to obviate the need for many of the resources normally required in traditional social movements resources such as time, money, organisational skills, and membership. This fact automatically makes protests easier and

cheaper on social media. As noted by Earl and Kimport (2011, p. 28), "social media platforms also provide new repertoires for collective action as these do not require a co-presence that would be normally expected in traditional movement mobilisation." The successes of uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in dislodging long-time autocrats, along with other digitally mediated mass protests such as Iran's 2009 Green Revolution, Spain's 2011 Indignados Movement, and the Hong Kong 2019-2020 protests, have further fueled what Sinpeng (2021, p. 194) describes as "cyber optimism."

However, sceptics of the power of digital media in effecting political change are quick to point out that social media can also be a bane for democracy. Following the initial euphoria surrounding the 2010 Arab Spring protests, it became increasingly clear that autocrats also know how to harness digital media for their political gains. Morozov (2012, p. 191) has noted how foreign interventionists often forget that "digital media platforms can also entrench dictators, threaten dissidents, and make it harder, not easier, to promote democracy." In the United States of America, which is sometimes described as a bastion of democracy, the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections and the Trump Presidency have sensitised the world towards the dark side of digital media, and the role that bots, artificial intelligence, and foreign actors can play in interrupting and influencing democratic elections. Extremist groups, terrorist organisations, and anti-democratic movements have taken advantage of digital media affordability to undermine democratic life. Besides, as demonstrated by the Buhari administration in Nigeria, repressive regimes can simply prohibit the use of social media platforms, as happened in the case of Twitter (CNN, 2021; Adepetun *et al.*, 2021).

A cursory look at studies on the role of the Internet in the African political landscape reveals a mixed and variegated picture. Some studies have downplayed the role of social media as a democratisation tool (see Sandoval and Fuah, 2010; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010). Concepts like "slacktivism" have been used to show that an over-reliance on social media to bring about political change in Africa is problematic (Cook *et al.*, 2014). This group of scholars, described by Bosch, Mare and Meli (2020, p. 350) as "techno-pessimists, "believe that social media cannot be a solution to political engagement. On the other hand, there is an appreciable body of work that has concluded that Africans have leveraged social media platforms for their benefit (Selnes & Orgeret, 2020; Cinammon, 2019; Baragwanath, 2016). For this group of scholars, social media has instigated new tools of engagement that ordinary people in Africa have employed to challenge political leaders. One of the main attributes of social media is the power it gives individual users to post and consume information in their own spaces. Lamoureaux and Sureau (2019) point out that social media platforms allow citizens in Africa to be engaged, especially during elections. Ordinary citizens can provide "oversight, including election monitoring, constitution-making processes, and human rights and reporting" (Lamoureaux & Sureau, 2019, p. 35). Social media allow the subaltern to speak and be producers of their content, unencumbered by formal protocols inherent in the mainstream media (Spivak, 1988). While these new digital technologies hold much promise, it is still unclear how successfully Nigerians have appropriated and "weaponised" these new digital technologies to achieve their "liberational" or "emancipatory" objectives.

In addressing the primary concerns of this work, one should take note that exposure to the Internet (and to social media in particular) has been through mobile and smartphone ownership (Bisschoft, 2017). The increase in access to these new digital technologies is beneficial as it can provide "multiple possibilities for innovation, including ... new forms of citizenship and activism" (Bisschoft, 2017, p. 9). One should note, however, that cellphone ownership varies across Nigeria, as rural populations still experience lower rates of Internet connectivity and lack broader participation in the digital economy (Alzouma, 2005).

As it is quite obvious, the structure of the Intern*et al*lows for multiple connections that serve as a focal point for its users. To that extent, social media platforms differ from established media in a variety of ways. They are loosely configured, do not have a clear-cut power structure, and in some cases, allow users to bypass the traditional gatekeeping that is inherent in the mainstream media (Bosch *et al.*, 2020).

Despite the differences between online and traditional movements, there is evidence to suggest that some political leaders in Africa perceive social media to be a threat. "Countries like Ethiopia, Uganda, Madagascar, Tanzania," and Nigeria "have reportedly placed some controls that regulate social media, justifying such moves as necessary for peace and national security" (Sebeelo, 2020, p. 98).

Shutting down social media sites during elections has also been widely reported across many African countries. For instance, in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Chad and Sudan, it is uncommon for ruling parties to shut down social media sites during elections for fear of unrest or peddling falsehoods. Political opponents and online activists have been jailed or killed in many countries in Africa.

Many examples abound across Africa that demonstrate the trepidation with which political leaders view social media. For instance, the arrest of Dr. Stella Nyanzi, an academic at Makerere University, Uganda, in April 2017 brought to light the perceived threat of social media. Nyanzi was arrested and charged with cyber harassment after allegedly criticising Museveni on Facebook (Rukundo, 2018). In yet another case, the speaker of the Cameroonian National Assembly, Hon. Cavaye Yeguie Djibril, referred to social media as a new form of terrorism in a speech addressing parliament in November 2016 (Dahir, 2016). In Nigeria, there have been attempts to introduce a so-called 'hate speech bill" by the National Assembly. These experiences suggest that even though social media platforms have provided some opportunities for many Africans, some political leaders perceive them to be a threat. While many countries have not likened social media to terrorism, at least not to the same degree as Cameroon, there is evidence that many leaders in Africa are still ambivalent about the role of social media in their countries.

Methodology

This study employed qualitative textual analysis to study the tweets, Facebook posts and Instagram comments of a group of five purposively selected activists on October 3 and October 21, 2020. This periodisation was in alignment with the date when large-scale protests began, sparked off by a viral video allegedly showing SARS officers killing a young man in the southern part of Delta State. October 21, 2020, on the other hand, is the day after Nigeria's security forces reportedly shot dead some demonstrators at Lekki, marking a tragic denouement to the protests (Aljazeera, 2020). The activists whose online communications are studied were the five female leaders of the #EndSARS protests: the musician DJ Switch (real name: Obianuju Catherine Udeh); Feyikemi Abudu, a civil rights activist and podcast host; Oluwaseun Ayodeji (a women's rights activist); Rinu Oduala (full name: Bolatito Rinu Oduala), a student activist; and Modupe Odele, a lawyer and social media influencer. Several media sources have acknowledged the leading role played by these women in the #EndSARS protests (BBC, 2020; Time, 2020; Washington Post, 2020).

Findings and Analysis

Table 1: Tweets, Facebook posts and Instagram Comments at Onset of #EndSARS

Name of Activist	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram
DJ Switch (Obianuju Catherine Udeh)	"#EndSARS. Shut down this impunity"	#EndSARS "Optimistic."	
Feyikemi Abudu (Podcast Host)	-	"Enough is enough."	"#EndSARS. Now is the time."
Oluwaseun Ayodeji Osowobi (Women's Rights Activist)	-	"Things have to change. Using social media, young people across Nigeria now feel like leaders in their own right... I know those who have died, so I have a responsibility, too to make sure I fight for the rights of young Nigerians through the use of the media.	-

As Table 1 above indicates, the onset of the #EndSARS protests seems to have been marked by optimism and a steely resolve to use the media to achieve the goals of the protests. The activists selected for this case study spoke of a desire to "shut down this impunity" and "using social media" to help young people have a say in the leadership of their country. Dalvit (2021, p. 209) has noted how "digital and mobile media provide new avenues for the perspectives, experiences and practices of members of marginalised groups to come to the fore.") This view had been earlier canvassed by Wasserman (2011). At this stage of the #EndSARS protests, the messages, one can safely say, were mainly calls for mobilisation and solidarity. The activists tend to bemoan the state of the nation, questioning the leadership of the country.

Commenting on the #ThisFlag movement, which began in April 2015 through the work of Evan Mawarire, a Zimbabwean pastor, Matsilele and Mutsvairo (2021, pp. 185, 186) have made observations that align with the current work:

> At the same time, by saying "Hatichada uye hatichatya" translated to mean "we are tired and we are no longer afraid," (Mawarire) seeks to embolden the masses with a rare ray of hope in a country, where amid government denials, opposition officials believe has become a possible outpost of tyranny. Is it a mere bluff to say he and his followers are "no longer afraid." The evidence suggests that indeed some Zimbabweans – once they resolve to fight – do so with their lives... The researchers considered this content as call to action. This is because it urges citizens to be active and join protests... This is a kind of piggybacking on dissidence – where dissidence spawns more dissidence.

In summary, both the #EndSARS protests and the #ThisFlag movement seem to suggest a strong belief, on the part of the activists, in the emancipatory potentials of the media and of mass action. Hashtag activism is viewed as a possible game changer, as suggested hereunder by Clark (2016, p. 796 – 797) in an analysis of the #Why1Stayed movement:

> In the case of #Why1Stayed, the hashtag acted as an easily personalized story-telling prompt, which provided a particular narrative focus for survivors to frame their diverse experiences in a compelling manner in 140 characters or less... By linking together numerous individual voices without relying on organisations, hashtag activism enabled a more intersectional movement ... Without privileged gatekeepers controlling the movement's counter-discourse, the protest challenges conventional understandings. ...

In short, social media served as a means to publicise or ventilate the grievances of the disgruntled, to give voice to the (hitherto) voiceless Nigerian masses, bringing to the fore the abuses carried out by rogue security operatives and the sufferings of their victims. In other words, the subaltern could now speak (Spivak, 1988, p. 66).

Table 2: Tweets, Facebook Posts and Instagram Comments after the Lekki Shootings

Source of Message	Twitter	Facebook	Instagram
DJ Switch (Obianuju Catherine Udeh)	(@dj switchaholic) #endswat #endsars #endbadgovernanceinnigeria	(Dj Switch) "Lets make sure the world see this so they don't change the story and tell people that we killed ourselves… I don't want us to die in vain. Nigeria… dictatorship with democratic face."	(@ djswitch) "They (soldiers) came in, guns blazing… I thought I was going to die. People died for nothing. People died for nothing… what did they do?"
Rinu Oduala (Bolatito Rinu Oduala)	(@ savvyrinu) "I am part of a generation of Nigerians who have lived most of their adult lives under 'democratic' rule and yet, I woke up today feeling there is no difference between the Nigeria I grew up in, and the Nigeria m parents grew up in."	Rinu @SavvyRinu "This current Nigeria should be turned into an app. So we can uninstall." #EndSARS	(@savvyrinu) "I am not afraid I am only disappointed that this country will treat me this way… People have been voiceless for a long time, people holding the government accountable is being seen as too much,"
Modupe Odele	Moe (@Mochievous) "I am not running (away). I am here investigation. (Statement issued in reaction to seizure of her passport by Nigeria Immigration Service)."	-	-

A cursory look at Table 2 reveals a certain rueful reflection on the apparent futility of the #EndSARS exercise. "People died for nothing," DJ Switch laments. Rinu Oduala, similarly, displays a disenchantment with the entire Nigerian project, wishing that the country were an Internet application that could be uninstalled.

Did the protests fail to achieve their goals? Perhaps so, but Oduala seems to think there is still work to do. "There is no difference between the Nigerian I grew up in and the Nigeria my parents grew up in," she tweets after the Lekki shootings. But DJ Switch still relies on social media to help tell the story: "Let's make sure the world sees this so they don't change the story and tell people that we killed ourselves." In other words, she recognises the direness of the situation. She acknowledges that what the organisers hoped to achieve by sheer force of mass activism and media publicity has not been entirely

achieved. The only remaining hope is to use media to ensure that the reality of the "Lekki massacre" is not twisted or covered up. By implication, the Internet has become perhaps the only "avenue to express their dissatisfaction" (Dalvit, 2022, p. 209). This situation seems to align with what Dahlberg (2007, p. 54) describes as an "agonistic model of the digital public sphere," where subordinate voices are in constant conflict with dominant ones, and members of the populace seek a channel to vent their frustrations.

Conclusion

This study has revealed, among other things, that the "emancipatory" powers sometimes arrogated to the media might sometimes be unfounded. The media may be able to place the national (or even global) spotlight on an issue. However, without a combination of other factors, real-world changes may be challenging to achieve. The media, the findings of this study seem to suggest, do not possess any natural performative powers. As noted by Matsilele and Mutsvairo (2022, p. 188), "social media platforms offer a space and a voice perhaps in the same way that coffee houses and restaurants did during (Jürgen) Habermas' days." However, if repressive governments feel no need to change, they will not, regardless of how much noise is made in the streets or the media. Furthermore, repressive governments now seem adept at what might be described as "asymmetric media warfare," the use of propaganda, deflection and deception to muddy the waters of public discourse and turn the tide of public opinion against dissidents and other critics of the government. These observations seem to align with the limited effects model of mass communication, as opposed to the hypodermic needle theory, which the emancipatory media theory, by the sheer semantics of its name, seems to support. In summary, the current researchers suggest that the media can be better described as "ventilatory" "rather than as "emancipatory." This reconceptualisation presupposes that the media may indeed set the agenda of public discourse but have no power to turn that discourse into any form of remediatory action.

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