Communication Vices that Engender Development: Oxymoronic Relevance of Social Media Use in Nigeria

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The Nigerian journalist has lost his monopoly of information gathering, dissemination and control with the involvement of citizens in 'journalism' through social media especially Whatsapp. The objective of this paper is to show how through social media, with emphasis on Whatsapp, Nigerian citizens have been able to find their voices and can now contribute to societal well-being and development by embarking on information gathering and reporting. It uses participant-observation method to interrogate how citizen journalism has engendered development via negative journalism practice. The findings indicate that the government and other relevant stakeholders in the society respond to the voices of the people on issues which ordinarily would have been muted by conventional journalism practice or ignored by government. It concludes that citizen journalism through unconscious and unprofessional practice engenders development by somehow making government accountable through its response to issues of concern in areas that would otherwise, have been muted.

Introduction

Before now, the Nigerian journalist had it all. He was the voice, the authority and the only one that could speak and the government and or other demi-gods in the society would listen. His words had weight; his information choice, vis-a-vis what gets disseminated or not was final. This monopoly has suffered drastically with the evolution of social media and their bringing into existence the new voices, the voices of the citizens through citizen journalism. This latest addition to journalistic practice has become the bane of both government and those who have hitherto commanded and determined what the media should cover. Citizen journalism erodes all manners of traditional media power, forcing all to follow its lead or become mere observers. As Xi has observed,

> The emerging forms of media, labelled as the new media, have pervaded in an unprecedented manner nearly all aspects of our everyday life, penetrated into the semi-autonomous social subsystems of politics, economy, and the military, and created constellations of interactions and exchanges unseen before, (2017, p. 273).

Social media are of course important parts of the new media. The evolution or, is it incursion? Of social media with their numerous platforms for information

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gathering and dissemination into Nigeria can best be described in oxymoronic terms as a necessary evil. They have provided new avenues for information dissemination and publicity for all categories of people and professions. The new media (internet based media) "have altered the meaning and significance of geograph" as well as reduced "inequality in mainstream media attention," (Verboord and van Noord, 2016, p. 60). This clearly shows that distance and class have been eroded as the new media have become open access sesame for everybody.

They can be said also to have come to wake from apparent slumber or lethargic somnambulism the average Nigerian who before now, used to venerate the journalistic profession. The social media have come to offer the rural semi-literate and even the complete illiterate Nigerian the freedom of expression which was not available to him/her with the traditional media. The social media have come to make journalists out of every Nigerian who can afford a handset that has the requisite applications to engage in information gathering, collation and dissemination. It does not matter whether the citizen journalist has any knowledge of journalism; it does not matter whether he can speak or write good English, what matters is that he has something to say, which in his thinking must be said. And he is the most qualified person to say it! This paper discusses the new wave of journalistic experience through social media which tends to rubbish the sacred nature and hallowed ethical journalistic and conventional practice of the profession. It does this through the examination of some social media platforms with emphasis on selected Whatsapp Chat Groups to which the writers belong and the information emanating from them. Needless to say, the writers are participant observers and are therefore, drawing from their experience.

Conceptual Definition of Terms

In the "Foreword" to *Many Voices, One World,* M'Bow, in his opening sentence says, "communication is at the heart of all social interactions," (1981, p. viii). For the Sean MacBride Commission, "communication maintains and animates life," (1981, p. 3); and for Adeseye and Ibagere, "communication is as old as man," (1999, p. 67). Communication entails the sharing or passing on of ideas, information, experience, from one party to the other so that it can be understood and acted upon. In a communication encounter, the underlining word is sharing. In other words, there must be something to be shared for communication to occur. Having been shared, the other party or parties in the sharing/ communication experience must react or respond for the experience to be complete. This reaction necessarily means that the shared experience was either understood or not. It does not mean that the response must be favourable rather it shows that communication has taken place. Talabi et al. (2018, p. 3), are of the view that "communication is key to the development of any society hence, man cannot not communicate." This makes communication a necessity for man. With communication, man interacts with fellow human beings and conducts his daily businesses, locally, nationally and internationally. For communication to be

effective it must be couched in comprehensible language; it must be clear and concise and must address specific issues of interest and concern to the receiver. Without communication in whatever form, man cannot make meaning of life nor can he make progress of any sort. If communication is this important to man, what then can be regarded as communication vices?

> Not all fake news or instances of misinformation are malicious. Stand-up comedians, writers and children generally create vivid scenes that if well-structured along the 5W's and H would qualify as faultless fake news. We need to pay closer attention to the variants of news so that we know what to tackle. When we cross writer's intention with content integrity, we have nine variants of news in our current information ecosystem. And when we examine the under currents of these nine variants, we will see where hate speech and fake news meet. There are three possible intentions of a today's news writer in the post-truth environment: to amuse the audience, to amass traffic and thereby money, or to attack, demean, or scare a person, group or organisation. The content of a piece of fake news may be factual, twisted or completely fabricated (Ojebode, 2018, p. 6).

In the above quotation, Ojebode does not only help us identify what constitutes "communication vices", but he also goes on to tell us the reasons why the writers of these communication vices do so. It is, therefore, clear that fake news, hate speech, deliberate misinformation/propaganda, as well as stand up comedies among others qualify as communication vices. Being vices does not mean that they are all malicious. Some are meant to amuse; some to create followership and gain a measure of popularity while some are not meant for noble intentions. Having identified communication vices as used in this paper, our attention would now shift to the phrase, "oxymoronic relevance". Oxymoron (noun) is a literary term, a figure of speech which uses opposite terms to illustrate a point. *The Oxford Dictionary Thesaurus & Wordpower Guide, 2nd Edition,* (2001, pp. 918–919), sees the term as, "noun", a figure of speech or expressed idea in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction (e.g., bittersweet). Of course, "oxymoronic" is its adjectival form. On their part, social media are the latest technological additions to the communications family. By their nature, they are not strictly mass media nor can they be classified as interpersonal communication because they have trappings of both. Social media have been seen by experts as "internet based applications", technology driven, "online tools and utilities," that permit online communication of information, encourage interactive participation and are websites that allow and encourage "user generated content," (Omosotomhe and Olley, 2018; Uzuegbunam and Omenugha, 2018).

In their seven years research entitled, "Risk, Crisis, and Social Media: A systematic review of seven years' research," the duo of Rasmussen and Ihlen cite Hogan and Quan-Haase, when they submit:

> We approach social media as web-based platforms whose key applications offer opportunities for users to communicate and maintain social relationships with multiple individuals. The most optimistic accounts of social media convey that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and You Tube offer anyone with necessary

knowledge and Internet access the opportunity to engage in many-to-many dialogue across the globe (Rasmussen and Ihlen, 2017, p. 2).

They went further on the same page to posit that, "empirical studies show strong patterns of homophily in social media, in that elites follow elites whereas "ordinary" citizens rarely get attention." This observation may well be true as it applies to Twitter and You Tube, not so with WhatsApp. With the latter, the relationship goes in the line of association, social groups, Age Grades, Club members, kindred and village groups, where educational levels vary, as well as elites where colleagues create groups of common interest. Thus, reasoning and cognition levels tend to affect the interaction as tempers may flare, to be controlled by the more enlightened and mature members. Also, Facebook, on its part is an open sesame to whoever has Internet access and can afford data and does not necessarily follow lines or groupings on the basis of literacy. These two platforms more than any others, that is, Whatsapp and Facebook, are the agents of citizenship liberation from the shackles of professional journalistic monopoly. They are, therefore, the major causes of the communication vices referred to in the title/topic of this paper. At one level, they have come to liberate the citizens and release the muted voices from their mute mode. At another level, they have come to abuse and make nonsense of professional journalism practice by the ignorance and poor knowledge of journalistic ethics exhibited by the citizens and users. Social media are therefore, the catalyst to citizen journalism and the bane of professional journalism in present day world of global-village-cities of modern man and digital communication in Nigeria at least.

Taking his definition from an online source, Udenze, (2018, p. 119) sees WhatsApp as "a freeware, cross-platform and end-to-end encrypted instant messaging application for smart phones." He goes on to that it "uses the internet to make voice calls, one to one video calls; send text messages, documents, PDF files, images, GIF, videos, user location, audio files, phone contacts and voice notes to other users using standard cellular mobile phones," (p. 119). WhatsApp, from the above definition, can be seen as social media platform that is quite a communication force to be reckoned with in terms of virtually any desired mode of communication to which the user wishes to deploy it.

Before the Advent of Social Media in Nigeria

The Nigerian press, dating back to the year 1859, can be said to have seen and experienced the best and worst of journalism practice, having contended with the colonial government which introduced it, then with the various military regimes with their autocratic tendencies and now, the Nigerian/African brand of democratic governance. In all these, the press can be said to have acquitted itself well. Indeed, the Nigerian press was reputed to have been instrumental to the attainment of independence (Duyile, 1989; Mabadeje, 2004) as well as a key player in the death of the first republic as the military found the attractions inherent in broadcasting and zeroed in on it as an agent for its own recognition as well as for disseminating information (Udeajah, 2003). The post-colonial/independence era saw the press

undergoing several challenges in its desire to achieve a society that is free from all forms of restrictions to free speech. The journalist in his various functions as reporter, writer, editor, etc. was the be all and end all in all matters of news coverage, from sourcing to disseminating.

Armed with the professional code of journalistic ethics as his constitution, he deployed his expertise by following the standard procedure of news coverage. The selective process, also called the selectivity theory (Nwanne, 2008) gave him the right to selective perception, selective exposure, selective attention and selective retention. Though the journalist was the judge and determiner of what news gets to the audience/public, he was prone to follow the hierarchy in the news process from gathering to reporting. He recognizes and follows the constituents of news such as prominence, timeliness, accuracy, fairness/objectivity, human interest, among others. The field reporter and other categories of journalists were answerable to the editor who gave the final approval of what information finally got to the reader/ listener/viewer. Even when there is live coverage, the reporter was conscious of the journalistic code as well as the dictum that says, "All that airs must be edited." There were checks and balances and self-censorship which saw to it that the journalist was neither flippant nor arrogant. He stayed within the bounds of decency, conscious of public interest, national security, and avoiding as much as he could, getting on the wrong side of the powers that be. In spite all the efforts at being fair as much as possible to all concerned, the journalist was still susceptible to the charge of being biased on the basis of the fact that what the public sees, hears or reads as news is the aspect and viewpoint the journalist chose to report. Thus, he is the defender, prosecutor and judge of what constituted news and how it is handled.

The power of the journalist to determine what news gets to the public has corresponding responsibilities. He was to ensure fairness in all his dealings by making sure all segments of the society get their fair share of representation in all matters of information coverage and dissemination. Of course, it goes without saying that he may from time to time, consciously or otherwise, default in carrying out these duties.

> Thus, the activities of women in society are not given much attention, except where such women are significant social actors (e.g., the First Lady), or where some women have done or are suspected to have done something that the male-dominated society had not expected from "women", (Oha, 1999, p. 14).

The procedural nature of news gathering and processing naturally creates room for allegations of bias and subjectivity in handling of information. Many a time, the rural areas are neglected while attention is focused on the cities. Also, the government of the day does not only interfere, but it also inclines towards controlling the media. Again, the sensitive nature of the journalistic profession makes it imperative that the practitioner must not only be protected against the powers that be, he must be protected against the public for whose sake he is risking his life and also be protected against himself for his own good! The importance of journalists' reliance on the code of ethics was underscored by Folarin when he cites Merrill:

...it brings the matter of morality to the individual person; it forces the journalist, among others, to consider his basic principles, his values, his obligations to himself and to others. It forces him to decide for himself how he will live, how he will conduct his journalistic affairs, how he will think of himself and of others, how he will think, act and react to the people and issues surrounding him (1999, p. 47).

The above submission clearly shows that the journalist does not only have to consider himself in his business of information gathering, transmitting and dissemination, he must also have in mind the other stakeholders such as the government and the public, his main focus since his central concern is usually the publics' right to know. The journalist's desire for the right of the public to know leads him to go beyond mere news reporting. As Okigbo, cited in Okunna (2003, p. 77) makes us understand, "telling the news is not enough." She continues, "journalists should go beyond telling the news and aim for the active involvement of the community through analysis, interpretation, evaluation and interaction." Called civic journalism, community journalism and recently, citizen journalism, the purpose of citizen journalism is "not just to tell people what the government says and does, but it should also encourage citizens to talk about their own expectations and what they feel about issues" (p. 77).

Civic journalism or community journalism was as originally conceived designed for the professionally trained journalist to report news and interpret news from the point of view of the citizens with a view to encouraging them to bare their minds on issues which are of relevance to them. It was not designed for citizens to wrest the entire news and information gathering and dissemination process from the professionally trained practitioner and invest such rights on the citizens. Unfortunately, this is the case with social media oriented citizen journalism. The social media have come as it were, to break the monopoly of the entire business of news and information gathering, processing and dissemination, from the professionals and invested the rights to the citizens to the point that the latter are on the verge of driving the former out of business and taking on the responsibilities, warts and all, and foisting them on the people and the government. It is so bad that the professional journalist and even the government are fighting to regain the glory of the halcyon days of professional journalistic practice that believes in the sanctity of journalism code of ethics! The reason is that citizen journalism has become a necessary evil that forces government to respond and act on issues which it would have otherwise ignored or sanctioned in the 'era' of conventional journalistic practice. Let us examine how this comes about.

Social Media and Citizen Journalism

The writer's overall perception and attitude to information from social media can be likened to the attitude of the German historian and publicist, August Von Schlozer (1735–1809), when he said, "foolish is the man who never reads a newspaper and even more foolish is the man who believes what he reads just because it is in the newspaper," (Toluna Influencers, 2018). The above statement can be rephrased by substituting newspaper for social media. One can then say that

foolish is the person who does not use social media (any of the platforms), and even more foolish is the person who believes what s/he reads/sees just because it is from social media. By this, one is saying that every information from any social media platforms should be treated with a pinch of salt until credibility is established before belief. At least, another source should substantiate whatever the social media offer before it can be taken seriously.

Sometimes called public journalism, the idea of citizen journalism, from inception, "is to frame stories from the citizen's view, rather than inserting man-in-the-street quotes into a frame dominated by professionals," (p. 509). The authors continue:

- It moves beyond the limited mission of "telling the news" to a broader mission of helping public life go well, and acts out that imperative....
- It moves from detachment to being a fair-minded participant in public life....
- It moves beyond only describing what is "going wrong" to also imagining what "going right" would be like....
- It moves from seeing people as consumers- as readers or non-readers, as bystanders to be informed- to seeing them as a public, as potential actors in arriving at democratic solutions to public problems, (Campbell et al. 2009, p. 508).

The noble intentions which saw the emergence of citizen/public/civic journalism have been no doubt eroded by the evolution of social media. With social media, citizens are no longer contented with being represented or their opinions sought. They have taken the bull by the horns, overthrown the professional journalist and have taken on the entire news production and dissemination process, warts and all; foisting their views on all and sundry and leaving the professional journalist and media practitioner trailing behind. Whereas, the professionally trained journalist was sensitive and mindful of public sensibilities and decency, the citizen journalist represents the very opposite of the professional. As was captured by the Clerk in Marie Corelli's novel, *The Sorrows of Satan,* "there's nothing like journalism, sir, for the suppression of truth!" (Corelli, 2006, p. 157). One can paraphrase the statement by observing that there is nothing like citizen journalism through the use of social media in exposing the truth! The citizen is propelled by several factors, not least, emotions/sentiments to report the news and disseminate it as he sees it. It is a highly subjective method of journalistic practice.

Factors that Influence Citizen Journalism

The average Nigerian lives and is inundated with myriad of insecurities and social challenges. He is conscious of the insincerity of governments at all levels so his distrust of government actions and policies is palpable. Arising from this, even the best intentions of government are suspect. His distrust of government at all levels is as a consequence of his daily experiences via his observations of the

lifestyles of political office holders which are not salutary. This is because the lifestyles of the politicians and party leaders make citizens to suspect their claims of sincerity and this distrust cuts across the geographical wind vane of the nation without recourse to ethnic or religious sentiments and rubs off on citizens a belief or rejection of government directives. To that end, our interactions with members of the Whatsapp Groups reveal the following factors as influencing citizen's initial response to whatever goes on around him and drives his overall attitude to citizen journalism.

- **Unemployment**. The average Nigerian is aware that job creation by government is media hype that does not translate to reality. You hear of job creation and empowerment, and like claims of miracle by some pastors you never know or get to see any of the beneficiaries of such healing until the scam is exposed for what it is.

- **Insincerity.** This is on the part of Nigerian government which through its officials engages in doublespeak thereby leaving people to respond with their varied understanding; interpretation and response. This complicates issues as it makes people take to their various social media outlets with their perceived understanding.

- **Frustration.** The said insecurities coupled with the absence of basic amenities in the areas of water, light, good road networks, security and the attendant police brutality, among numerous others unlock the tongue and unleash various protestations which manifest in posts on social media.

- **Mischief making.** Some people cannot resist the joy of pranks; some go out of their way to test their popularity through fake information (a good number of youths are guilty of this), some also do it out of sheer ignorance.

- **Idleness.** The saying that an idle mind is the devil's workshop became more apparent with the global lockdown occasioned by the corona virus (Covid-19) pandemic that was said to have originated from China's Wuhan Laboratory. The lockdown which prevented people to leave their homes created an escape for them through social media. The consequence is an avalanche of information and misinformation, fake news, all manners of fabrication and mischief making purportedly geared towards relieving people from the boredom of lockdown. The effect is confusion as there are more "Doctors" prescribing solutions than the disease itself.

- **Injustice.** When people perceive what the government is doing or about to do as biased or unjust, they quickly react. Some times their reaction helps to nip such action in the bud and forestalls it. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown this to be the case in Nigeria. For example, the death of President Muhammadu Buhari's Head of Service to the Government of the Federation, Mallam Abbah Kyari on the 17th of April, 2020, has revealed this to be true. Information went viral on social media (Whatsaap), alleging that the Imo State governor, His Excellency, Senator Hope Uzodimma, said that because the late Abbah Kyari made him the governor, he, Hope Uzodimma, was going to immortalize him by renaming the state owned university after the late Abbah Kyari. No sooner was this information

circulated than the governor deployed both social and traditional media to refute the claim.

- **Humorists:** There are also those who make the social media bubble with their creativity. This group competes with the professional stand-up comedians in making fun of everything. The most serious issues of governance, private and public engagements serve as avenue for poking fun and this covers all the social media platforms and no subject is sacred. This group helps the ordinary citizen keep hope alive by giving him reason/cause to smile through its creative ingenuity.

- **Personality Stalkers.** There are those who spend time and money stalking renowned personalities on the internet and social media. They are what Nigerians refer to as "monitoring spirits." Their intentions are neither noble nor uplifting, rather, they manners of speech and writing; they then write all sorts of things and attribute study these personalities' styles and them to the said personalities. Some make money from it while others derive joy from such misinformation. You only get to know that the information is not credible by either contacting the affected personality or studying the content which must inevitably have grammatical, spelling or tenses blemish.

- **Advertisements:** With the Covid-19 imposed lockdown, people device and innovate ways of making ends meet. Many undergraduate students have taken to blogging, to petty trading, and others to whatever product catches their fancy, all in a bid to combat idleness and be relevant. Whatever the engagements may be, they must be advertised and social media provide ready and available outlets.

These are some of the causes of citizens taking to social media to express themselves. The reasons are of course, not exhaustive and cannot be exhausted in a single paper. This work can, however, engender subsequent works on the subject.

Research Method

The research method adopted is the participant observation. The researchers belong to various Whatsapp chat groups from where they drew their primary data by way of posts and reposts as they appear in the group and also reactions of group members provided further insights. The screenshots used here as primary data were all from the various Whatsapp Chat Groups to which the researchers belong. The materials were therefore in the public domain. Some may have been originally posted on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp and the like. But the ones used here were from all from Whatsapp.

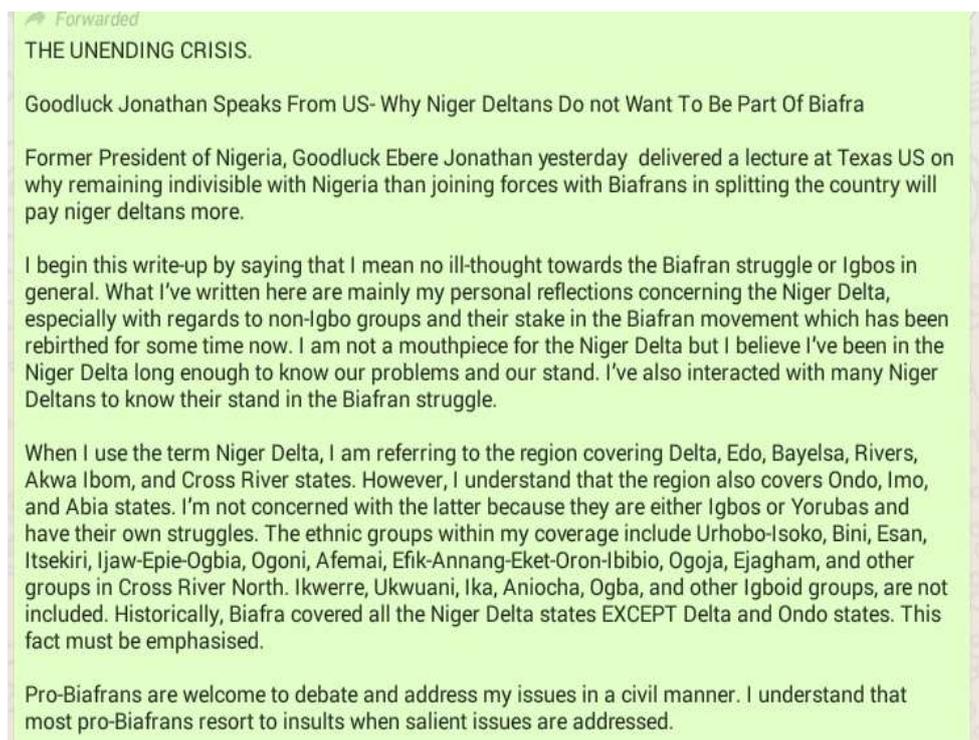## Oxymoronic Relevance of Social Media and their Contributions to Development

Oxymoron is one of the literary devices (figures of speech) which creative writers use to add style and beauty to their work in order to enrich such work. Figures of speech are usually referred to as ornaments of literary language because they are used to beautify creative works such as poetry, drama and prose. Oxymoron is a figure of speech which uses two opposite or contradictory words to reveal the truth (Nwachukwu-Agbada et al., 2014, p. 5); for example "a beautiful witch." In this paper, the oxymoronic relevance of social media use in Nigeria refers to the fact that social media are supposed to be deployed by Nigerian citizens to address issues of concern to the citizens, the society and the government for the well-being of all the stakeholders. Unfortunately, this is not the case as the social media are instead being used for and against everyone, including the citizens themselves. Examples can be seen from the plethora of information and misinformation which emanated from the citizens with particular emphasis on the covid-19 pandemic. Based on the foregoing, one can therefore, submit that the social media use in Nigeria from the point of view of citizen journalism is in oxymoronic terms, harmfully beneficial. Their ability to elicit response from the government and other authorities is decidedly positive and a good development.

We now turn our attention to examples drawn from Whatsapp Chat Groups to illustrate how social media engender and contribute to development. The examples are randomly taken from information from the said groups as they are received. Where necessary, the information would either be paraphrased or reproduced verbatim and then analyzed in line with the focus of the paper. The screenshot below is self-explanatory. Needless to say, there were claims and counter claims between the Nigerian army and the public.


The average Nigerian lacks faith in the government to the point that even when the information above was confirmed as true nothing else happens. The

good thing was that there was response from the accused; whereas in the past the release of the video would have meant a manhunt for the "bloody civilian" that dared point fingers at the army. The relevance of social media to the Nigerian masses can be likened to the cries of a chick in the hugging death embrace of a hawk. The cries are not for help (the chick is beyond help at this point), rather, they signify a plea for the world to take notice. The Nigerian masses are the chicks to the political and power-monger hawks. Therefore, if the chick's cries elicit positive reaction from the hawk, so be it. That is exactly how the social media function and it is good for the society because before now, voices of protest or of complaint were either muted by conventional media through the news selection process or when carried, was simply ignored by the government as irrelevant, insignificant or unimportant and therefore of no effect. This is substantiated by Graber in the third edition of her book, *Mass media and American politics,* when she says, "without media attention the people and events covered by the news might have no influence, or reduced influence, on decision makers. Conditions that may be tolerated while they remain obscure may quickly become intolerable in the glare of publicity," (Graber, 1989, p. 6). In the bid to avoid the unpleasantness generated by information from social media, the government is forced to respond to douse tension.

> ↱ Forwarded
>
> THE UNENDING CRISIS.
>
> Goodluck Jonathan Speaks From US- Why Niger Deltans Do not Want To Be Part Of Biafra
>
> Former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebere Jonathan yesterday delivered a lecture at Texas US on why remaining indivisible with Nigeria than joining forces with Biafrans in splitting the country will pay niger deltans more.
>
> I begin this write-up by saying that I mean no ill-thought towards the Biafran struggle or Igbos in general. What I've written here are mainly my personal reflections concerning the Niger Delta, especially with regards to non-Igbo groups and their stake in the Biafran movement which has been rebirthed for some time now. I am not a mouthpiece for the Niger Delta but I believe I've been in the Niger Delta long enough to know our problems and our stand. I've also interacted with many Niger Deltans to know their stand in the Biafran struggle.
>
> When I use the term Niger Delta, I am referring to the region covering Delta, Edo, Bayelsa, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River states. However, I understand that the region also covers Ondo, Imo, and Abia states. I'm not concerned with the latter because they are either Igbos or Yorubas and have their own struggles. The ethnic groups within my coverage include Urhobo-Isoko, Bini, Esan, Itsekiri, Ijaw-Epie-Ogbia, Ogoni, Afemai, Efik-Annang-Eket-Oron-Ibibio, Ogoja, Ejagham, and other groups in Cross River North. Ikwerre, Ukwuani, Ika, Aniocha, Ogba, and other Igboid groups, are not included. Historically, Biafra covered all the Niger Delta states EXCEPT Delta and Ondo states. This fact must be emphasised.
>
> Pro-Biafrans are welcome to debate and address my issues in a civil manner. I understand that most pro-Biafrans resort to insults when salient issues are addressed.

Recently, there was a claim alleging that the former President, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan was in Texas, USA, where he gave a lecture in which he was said to have made references dissociating the Niger Delta from Biafra agitations and similar claims. His media adviser, Mr. Ikechukwu Eze refuted the claim observing

that the former President was not anywhere near USA, let alone Texas and could not have given any lecture or sent a representative. See screenshot above.
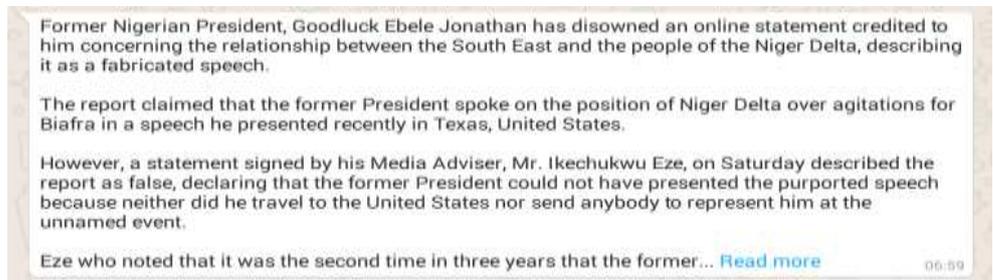
The two screenshots above show the originating story and its counter. For an average person, such information attributed to such personality cannot but be credible. When such information is refuted by the person, the receiver becomes thoroughly confused.
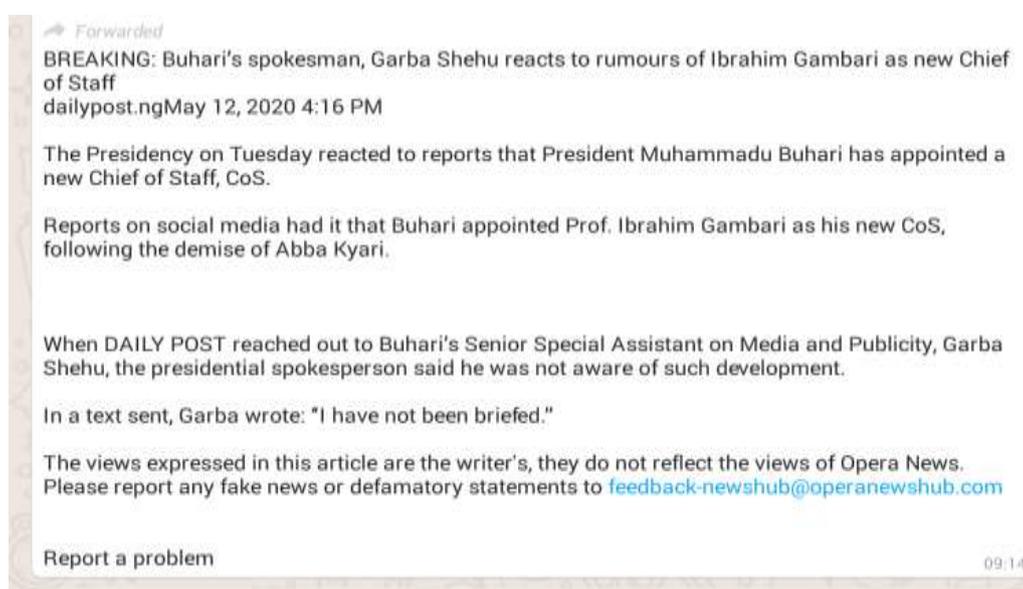
The Corona virus (Covid-19) pandemic raving the globe has created further avenue for the citizens to question the credibility and sincerity of the government with claims and counter claims ranging from figures of infected victims to whether the virus is real (see also, Ademiju-Bepo 2020).

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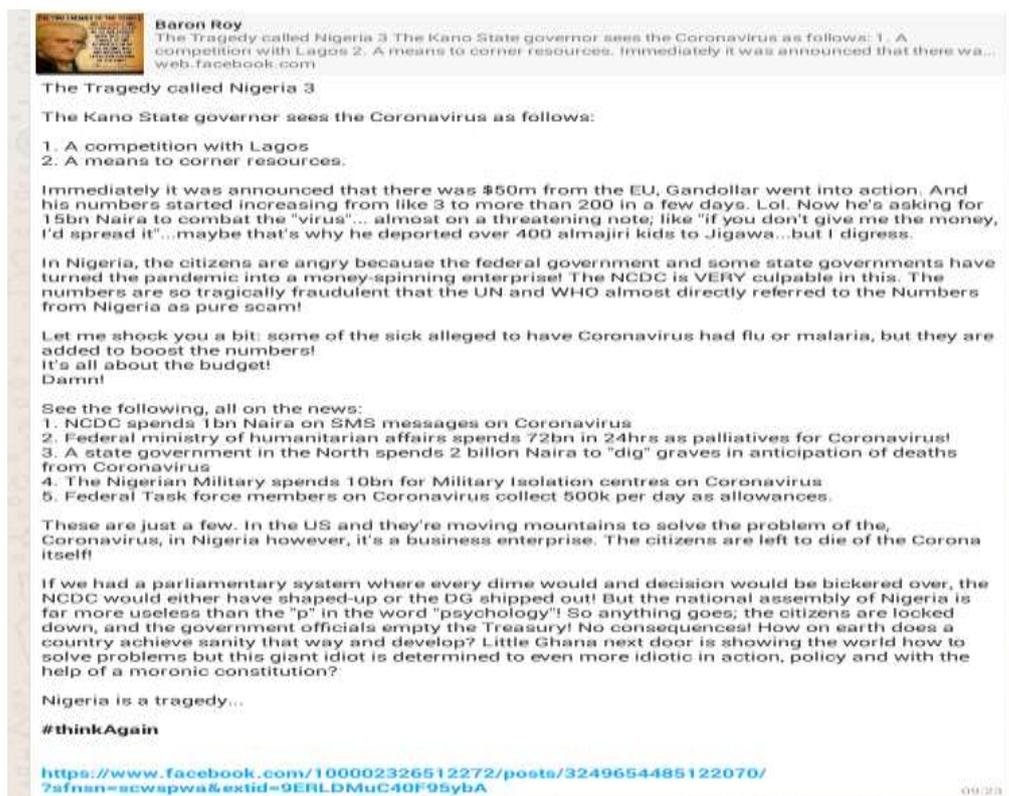
[1]All the screenshots used here were taken from the Whatsapp Groups monitored. Some of them may have appeared in other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, etc. but they were reposted on Whatsapp hence their use here.

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The screenshot above is another forwarded post taken from a Whatsapp group chat. The information it contains documents the attitude of the Federal and state governments to the corona virus pandemic. It represents the majority of what the citizens think about the disease which makes it difficult for the majority of them to identify with government position on social distancing, lockdown, use of facemasks, etc.

It has been mentioned earlier that social media foreshadow the action and inaction of government thus putting the government on the defensive and using conventional media to authenticate or contradict the information. One such event played out recently when social media carried the news that Professor Ibrahim Agboola Gambari was the new Chief of Staff (CoS) to the Federal Government, as a replacement to late Abbah Kyari. The information was immediately refuted by a source attributed to the presidency, only for the same news to be carried by a reputable private television in its news barely twenty four hours after thereby confirming the earlier claim.

> ↪ Forwarded
>
> BREAKING: Buhari's spokesman, Garba Shehu reacts to rumours of Ibrahim Gambari as new Chief of Staff
> dailypost.ngMay 12, 2020 4:16 PM
>
> The Presidency on Tuesday reacted to reports that President Muhammadu Buhari has appointed a new Chief of Staff, CoS.
>
> Reports on social media had it that Buhari appointed Prof. Ibrahim Gambari as his new CoS, following the demise of Abba Kyari.
>
> When DAILY POST reached out to Buhari's Senior Special Assistant on Media and Publicity, Garba Shehu, the presidential spokesperson said he was not aware of such development.
>
> In a text sent, Garba wrote: "I have not been briefed."
>
> The views expressed in this article are the writer's, they do not reflect the views of Opera News. Please report any fake news or defamatory statements to feedback-newshub@operanewshub.com
>
> Report a problem   09:14

The above information made news headlines on the 12th of May, 2020, and on the 13th at its news at 8.00 pm, it was confirmed by Africa Independent Television (AIT). Sometimes, the reverse is the case and the conventional media blaze the trail and one has to search social media for further information. Perhaps, their ready availability makes social media the fastest information source for the citizens and even for the traditional news media. Whichever the case, social media, WHATSAPP in particular, puts the citizen a step ahead of what obtained in the past in terms of news availability, processing and dissemination.

For the Nigerian citizen, the lines between conventional media and social media in terms of news processing and dissemination get thinner by the day. It becomes very difficult to determine whether it is the social media dog wagging the conventional media tail or the reverse. Whichever may be the case, citizen journalism enables the citizen to be a participant in news creation and

dissemination. The era of being sidelined or his voice being muted in matters of public affairs is over. As long as the government has not succeeded in passing any bill controlling social media use, the ordinary citizen has a say in governance. He is not successful in influencing decisions for or against all the time; but whenever he succeeds someone somewhere gets a new lease of life no matter how short lived. When he fails to, he nevertheless is able to send a message across and his voice of protest or support is noted.

Suffice it to say that social media have come to right the wrongs done against the Nigerian citizen by both government and conventional/professional journalism practice in terms of news coverage and information dissemination. Through social media, the citizens have taken the gauntlet and are now in the forefront of news creation for whatever it is worth, warts and all. They do not care who is listening but they are aware that someone somewhere is listening. They do not care about ethics or are affected by professional news procedure, their news and information manufacturing and dissemination can best be described as "being on the go and as it occurs to the sender."

Results

The following, among others, are the findings of this study.

- It was observed that social media platforms especially Whatsapp serve as an avenue for citizens to express themselves. This is done through graphics-print; video and audio as well as voice recordings.
- Information/news from social media has credibility problems. One needs to seek several information sources in order to authenticate such information/ news before accepting it.
- Social media create doubts in people's mind about the veracity of news from conventional news media by being ahead of them with the news,
- Social media sources lack professional media ethics and thus disseminate news and information as it comes.
- Governments pay attention to news from social media and react to them on the basis of their weight; examples are the burial of Abbah Kyari and the appointment of Professor Ibrahim Gambari as his replacement. In the former, government apologized to the complaint of the citizens in the abuse of social distance while in the latter, it reversed itself by the appointment after initial denial of it.
- Social media, in most cases, are ahead of conventional media in news and information dissemination.
- Social media help the citizens get along by providing comic relief through their posts; they also complicate matters by posting information that creates tension.

Conclusion

Before the advent of social media and to a certain extent even now, the journalism profession is regarded as noble and many people if they had their way, would have loved to be in it. The reason is obvious: when the journalist speaks, everybody, without exception, listens. The internet with its social media platforms has eroded and undermined the journalistic profession by turning whoever has android phone and can afford the cost of data to a journalist of sorts. Thus, we have the citizen journalist that is an entire media house, - electronic and print,- all rolled into one, being source, reporter, photographer, camera man, proof reader, editor, etc. The citizen has found his voice and it rings out from all the seven heads of Hydra[2] causing confusion and sometimes, making sense. The good thing is that when it makes sense, the powers that be respond. This response is for the benefit of all whether it is for better or worse, it signals the fact that the voice was heard.

The paper has therefore, examined the way the masses respond to their government through the use of social media with specific focus on selected Whatsapp Chat Groups. The involvement of citizens in information and news processing and dissemination is altogether a good development as it creates room for self-expression and in some way involves the citizens in governance. Though, it is a good development, it ought to be done with caution as it has a great tendency to confuse. It is however, bad and irresponsible government that creates room for the citizen to become a critic of sorts because when doubts are created in the minds of people, credibility and trust are lost. For instance, the insincerity of government in the fight against the corona virus pandemic is underscored by resident doctors being on strike action in the heat of the pandemic. Also, the lip service which government pays to education is equally undermined by the Academic Union of Nigerian Universities (ASUU), being on strike since the beginning of the lockdown. This singular act of strike action makes nonsense of government directive that Virtual learning be commenced to engage the students meaningfully during the period. Moreover, the facilities for actualising it like the commonest denominator, which is the provision of electricity are completely lacking. All these combine to provoke the citizens to take to social media to express themselves.

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[2]Hydra in Greek mythology was a giant water snake that lived in a swamp near Lerana in the land of Argos. The number of heads is reported variously as few as 5–100. (Retrieved from: encyclope dia.com/litera ture-and-arts/classical-literature-myt. [Accessed 2 June 2020.]

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