Social Media and the Dissemination of Information at the Grassroots: Power and Challenge

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Abstract
The fundamental right to information has global and national concerns and provisions because it is considered paramount and essential to people’s participation in democratic governance. The media is the tool through which this right is attained. In Nigeria, the right to information (access and sharing) suffers serious setback especially under the military administrations. With return to civil democratic rule, a little shift was witnessed through the establishment of more private owned media organizations. Still with this development, access to media and information is restricted to less significant percentage of the populace. With the advent of the social media, more people currently have more access to certain information and can even share it with more diverse members of the society. Based on the Democratic Participant Media and Mediamorphosis theories, this paper reviews secondary data and examines how the pressure and the need for information dissemination at the grassroots prompted the quick transformation and shift brought about in Nigeria where citizens regardless of their political, educational and economic status become more active in sourcing and sharing information via face book, Twitter, etc. This development made the conventional media to strive to change their pattern and the government to revisit its attitude and become more liberal in information dissemination. However, with the role played by Social Media in accessing and sharing information, Internet access and affordability is still low among citizens. Considering the power and relevance of the social media and the level of Internet access in the country, the paper recommends for improvement in Internet access and affordability to citizens to enable people participate actively in accessing and sharing information for a better democratic governance.

Keywords: Social Media, Information Dissemination, Power

Introduction
Information has to do with facts and details about something. Communication as seen by Hasan (2013) is a process of sharing or exchanging ideas, information, knowledge, attitude, or feelings among two or more persons through certain signs and symbols. Communication is a universal phenomenon, the relevance and importance of which cannot be over emphasized. Freedom to secure information is one of the fundamental human rights that is also enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria section 39(1).

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.

Generally information/communication is important to human beings at individual, organizational and societal level. It is indeed a critical requirement for social existence and a resource required in exchanging and sharing ideas and thoughts among people which in turn leads to development. It also provides easy way for the propagation of learning and invention.
It helps in the protection, preservation and dissemination of cultural heritage and maintenance of law and order. Important life skills like critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, conflict resolution, team building etc are only learnt via communication (Pearson, et al 2003).

Information and communication generally is one of the indispensable ingredients in democracy. It is through communication voters are educated on the electoral process, political advertisements are made; special jingles and programmes are used to inform the electorate on candidates’ manifestos among others. This may be why different media of communication are evolved and used.

**Mass Media**
The media according to Baran (2009) is a technology that carries messages to a large number of people as newspaper carries printed word and radio conveys the sound of music and news just like television/film conveys both sound and vision. It is subdivided into *traditional and new* media. The traditional media consists of Broadcast (Radio/Television/film) and *print* (newspaper, magazine, books etc). The *new* media otherwise called Internet is the focus of the paper.

All these forms of media function properly to gather, process and disseminate information/messages of different sorts to their respective audience that are scattered, heterogeneous and anonymous. They educate, enlighten, socialize, mobilize and correlate.

**Social Media**
This refers to the form of media technology brought about as a result of the information super highway that delivers all kinds of electronic services: sound and video, text, data to household and business (Hasan, 2013). Social media is a means of interacting among people in which they create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. It is an internet based application that is built on the ideological and technological foundations that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content (Kaplan, 2012 in Balarabe, 2014).

The impact of the more sophisticated, more glamorous and more “powerful” electronic media (Hasan, 2013) is gradually transforming society, thus, making more complex compared to the traditional media system. The introduction of films helps to convey contemporary messages visually; radio programming sends messages to farmers, rural dwellers and civil servants more efficiently. And now the new media crowns it all by making it more individual, on the spot and efficient especially doing away with censoring “bottlenecks” (Usman, 2014). The use of the internet (via personal computers) by individuals both at home and work places made people (having the skills) to use computer in their daily life activities. The old message for large, heterogeneous, anonymous and scattered audience is gradually replaced by people connecting themselves via network of computers to share information and ideas with less/minimum official interference.

This worldwide accessible Internet consists of or houses different domestic, academic, government and business networks providing information and services (e-mail, online chat, file transfer etc).
Features of the Internet as Social Media

The social or new media is unique in its features. Akinfeleye (2011) citing Professor Martin Iruke of the Georgia University USA described the Internet as:

- A global network of computers
- A worldwide electronic computer system using a common means of linking hardware and transmitting digital information
- A country of people using a common electronic communication technology
- A globally distributed system of electronic communication

According to him, features of this medium include;

- A twenty-four hour nonstop global electronic form of communication
- An online library and international communication system
- A business and corporate global communication medium
- A distance and remote education system and
- A multimedia and commercial delivery communication system for news and entertainment.

Again the social media articulates a list of other users with who they share a connection. More so, individuals and communities share, co-create and modify user generated content, construct a public or semi public profile within a bounded system. Users of the social media also traverse their lists of connections and those made by others within the system. It is also free of conventional media control.

Forms of the Social Media

Users of the social media the world over have wide range of options to choose and use from the social media. Among the commonly used forms include:

Facebook: This is a free social networking website which allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and videos, send and receive messages thereby remaining connected with friends, families across the world. It is the leading form of social media used in Nigeria enjoyed by even the least literate individuals.

Twitter: This is another social network and micro blogging service that allows users to send and receive/read short character messages known as “Tweets”.

WhatsApp Messenger: It is a cross-platform mobile messaging application that allows a person to exchange messages free of any SMS charge. This service is available and accessible via iphone, Blackberry, Android, windows phones and Nokia.

YouTube: This is used for posting videos especially in marketing business or clients.

Blog or otherwise called web blog: is an informational or discussion site on the worldwide web. It consists of posts (discrete entries) where the most recent appears first.

Google+: It consists of group of friends/colleagues who are interested in thought leadership and technology and not purely friends or business contacts (as in facebook or LinkedIn respectively).
LinkedIn: This allows registered users to maintain a list of contact details of people with whom they share some level of relationship or connections. The users can also invite other people (site users or not) to be in the connection.

Instagram: It is one of the ruling visual images and photos platform that offers stylized filters for photographs and images. These among other forms of the social media are used by people to post, share, comment, invite, upload, tweet etc different kinds of information, ideas and opinions on different topical issues especially during the political/democratic dispensation.

Theoretical Framework
This paper is based on two theories: Mediamorphosis and Democratic Participants Media Theories. According to Fidler (1997), Mediamorphosis refers to the transformation of communication media as a result of the interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures, and social and technological innovations. To him, the new media grow out of the metamorphosis of the traditional media. This emergence is as a result of the perceived inadequacies and denials of opportunities to the citizens and the pressing need of their participation in democracy. Thus the new media become a solace for them to satisfy their information and communication urge.

The Democratic Participant Media theory, (McQuail, 1987) assumes that individual citizens and minority groups should have right of access and right to communicate through the media according to their determination of need, and that media organization and content should not be subject to centralized state or political bureaucratic control especially in democracy where popular participation is necessary for good governance.

These two theories are relevant to this paper because the perceived needs of people are not satisfied by the media and denial of access to the media in Nigerian democracy necessity the popular acceptance and resort to utilize the social media in having and sharing information which a necessary catalyst to participation in democracy.

Information Disseminated Via Social Media
The social media as a platform is used to disseminate different kind of information and issues. Those among others include:

News: Daily events and occurrences in the society especially political developments are quickly passed/shared among people via social media. This helps to close the wide information gap left by conventional government owned media especially concerning the opposition parties.

Commentaries: Peoples’ comments on issues unfolding in the society; political activities, political party candidates, government performance and the likes are discussed freely and people giving their opinions on the social media. This greatly facilitates political discourse and opinion sharing among people.
**Rejoiners:** People especially those having no or those denied access to the conventional media find solace in the social media as they use it to make rejoinders and pass their views on issues they heard from political leaders or candidates. In fact, the one way flow or top-down flow of information that characterized the conventional media in Nigeria was broken where the social media takes the lead in the bottom–up flow thus truth and falsehood were allowed to grapple (Egbon 1996).

**Analysis:** The social media was also used as a forum for issue analysis. Issues of governance, politics, health, and other social issues having direct bearing on the people and country were freely analyzed based on the understanding of the analysts.

**Videos/Photos:** Real videos and photos of some scenarios, activities and topical events are posted/shared among people thus checking the impact of self censored media.

**Announcements:** The social media also greatly assisted in public announcements/publicity of social issues: Wedding and naming ceremonies, parties, symposia, conferences and political rallies among others.

Other information sent via social media includes: obituaries, congratulatory messages, condolences, goodwill messages, reminders and so on.

The social media has actually facilitated the dissemination of information at the grassroots owing to its availability and accessibility to most of the people. Unlike the conventional media in which participation may be limited to a few, people can participate in discourse through the social media in one way or another depending on their interest.

**Power of the Social Media**

Media generally is considered to be powerful due to the trust and confidence audience have in it. Media command pervasive influence on its audience (Bittner, 1987). Neumann (1973) believes that the mass media can have a significant effect on a large number of people. The social media is currently building its strength on this global power phenomenon to impact on the people in all facets of life. Its power and impact is seen in the growth of world network population from millions to billions since the rise of the Internet in the early 1990s. Social media has become a fact of life for Civil Society the world over involving many actors: regular citizens, activists, Non-Governmental Organizations etc.

With the social media, communication landscape is fast becoming denser, more complex, more participatory, and networked population is gaining greater access to information and enhanced ability to undertake collective action as demonstrated in Manila during the 2001 impeachment trial of Philippine President Joseph Estrada where a protest was arranged via text messages reading: “Go 2 EDSA, wear blk”. Similar incidence also happened in Spain where the Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar was ousted, (Shirky, 2011). In fact, social media serves as the coordinating tool for almost all the world’s political movements because it increases freedom and poster participation. Its power is demonstrated in uprising that occurred in Egypt, Syria and the likes.

Discussing the power of the social media, Hasan (2013) views it especially through the following use angles:
The worldwide web – The Internet has facilitated the access to sharing of information to millions of people through search engines like Google. Information is now decentralized and more available. The power to access information is key to democratic participation and societal development.

Remote access - The power of the social media is also easily discerned due to its remote accessibility. Many people that are remotely connected via the Internet world over can work collaboratively from home and office: share information, audit accounts, conduct business etc.

Streaming media - Internet connected devices like the computer are used to access online media (broadcast and print) just like receivers. This makes it easy to listen, view, read or review media content before and after scheduled time.

File sharing – is another area showcasing real power of the social media. Files through the computer can be shared (e-mailed) to many partners, colleagues etc as attachments. They subsequently download and use it. Through these software products, publications, office and business documents are all shared.

Collaboration among different individuals, groups and corporate organizations is another power of the social media. Collaboration is easier and cheaper via the Internet’s wide coverage. You can chat through chat rooms or channels or use instant messaging that is quicker and more convenient.

E-mail is among the common usage of the internet that shows its power. Electronic mails/texts are sent between individuals and corporate groups easily and efficiently. One can send even a single mail to many recipients at a time.

The importance or power of the social media cannot be over emphasized. Previously people relied on the conventional media, currently there is sharp transformation seen with the use of the computers that could be termed as radical shift especially in terms of control of information. This transformation is even at the verge of clarity that the distinction between mass communication and interpersonal communication.

The power of the new media can also be seen in the way it alters the meaning of geographic distance, allowing for the increase in the volume of communication, opportunity for interactive communication and allowing different forms of communication separated before to overlap and interconnect.

**Challenges of the Social Media**

The social media though powerful and useful have posed some challenges on the users and the society. Among the common challenges is the credibility of sources. Information on the social media can be posted by any person. Nowadays people with Internet connection have turned into journalists. Thus, it becomes difficult to establish source credibility concerning information found on the social media forums.
The credibility and trustworthiness of the source (individuals, organizations) causes regular trafficking on the Internet (James et al. 2009). Due to this freedom and opportunity created by the social media (the coverage and openness), uprisings in some countries (Egypt) and toppling of rulers (Philippines, Spain) occurred. With the use of mobile phones, people create fictional identity (facebook name) and post information and visuals with long-lasting damages on the net.

Fate of personal privacy is another challenge of the social media. In an environment within which diverse types of information can be disseminated, personal privacy could not be guaranteed.

Authenticity of content is another vexing challenge. With source’s credibility doubted, the authenticity of the content may also be doubted. How true are facts discussed? True facts could be distorted on the net.

There is also security concern posed by the social media especially considering the increase in the occurrences and number of cyber crimes. Political messages initiated by insurgents/terrorists can be spread via social media.

Sense of diversity/complexity is another challenge posed by the new media. The traditional media provides some homogenizing trend previously to all age categories. Young and old shared experience reflecting on accepted social patterns, but today’s social media cleared this veil and provide more individualistic vogue alien cultures. This partly led to sexual objectification of women and sexualization of media images having consequential effect of sexual revolution.

Displacement of rugged and reliable media sources (Newspapers, magazines, TV shows) is being displaced. In fact, desk top computers suffer similar impact. People spend less time on conventional media and concentrate on the social media, (Pogue, 2015).

There is also the shake weight challenge posed by the social media according to Eisenberg (2013). This form of media and mobile revolution is about data, real time velocity and variety of data sometimes unstructured (pictures, videos, sentimental analyses, etc) from desperate sources which causes indigestion and confusion. Sorting out the information and acting on it so as to meet up the demands of the public an organization serves is actually a concern.

On the part of the users, Internet access is the major challenge. In Nigeria, some people avoid the social media because they do not have access to the Internet. In some areas, no internet access is available thereby making it impossible for them to use the social media.

The users also may find it difficult to retrieve information from the social media especially where not downloaded and saved. This affects subsequent storage and reference.

Misuse of the forms of social media is another challenge. Users of the social media especially politicians have abused the networks by posting insults and attacking personalities in most cases contrary to the constitutional provisions. Again, its use in pornographic postings pause a serious challenge to moral values.
Conclusion
The social media is currently an indispensable tool and companion to the people. Through it, accessing and sharing information to many people have become easier. It has also greatly assisted people to publicize their opinions and participate in social issues without hindrances. However, the powers of the media forms have led to overthrowing powerful leaders. Currently, some people to abuse it by posting some pornographic and anti-cultural issues.

Recommendation
Despite the powers of the social media, access to it still remains a mirage in some communities. To minimize or check this challenge facing the social media, there is the need for providing Internet access to all nooks and crannies of the Nigerian nation. People need to be reoriented to understand the implication of posting unnecessary videos or information on the net in order to check some of its negative consequences.

Media regulatory agencies like National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria (BON) and other international regulatory agencies should devise means of checking and censoring content of the social media.

Media professionals need to brainstorm so as to come with possible means of minimizing the negative effects of the social media

Undue self and official censorship bedeviling traditional government owned media should be revisited to enable them satisfy the need of their audience so as to check the solace people find in the new media.

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