Engaging Social Media for Socio–Economic Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Development is the priority of every government at all levels, both in developed nations and emerging economics of the world. Different governments adopt different strategies, depending on their disposition to achieve their developmental goals. The Nigerian governments in this light have applied different strategies at different times, all aimed at giving the Nigerian people a face lift. However, they do not seem to be there yet. The emergence of the internet through its various outlets and platforms has, however, brought about a total change in the people way of life. It has penetrated deeply in every aspect of human life, affecting our attitudes, values, perceptions, relationships and life generally. It has, in fact, become part of our everyday lives. Individuals, groups, corporate organizations and governments are taking advantage of the internet facilities to better their lots. Harnessing the full potentials of the social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and so on in advancing the general wellbeing of the Nigerian citizenry forms the main objective of this paper. It also acknowledges the challenges of engaging the social media in development considering the poor infrastructure, and as well suggests ways of minimizing or circumventing the challenges to maximize results.

Keywords: Development, Internet, Social Media, infrastructure, Strategies

Introduction

Social media is one of the platforms available on the Internet for instant sharing of diverse information with people across the globe in real time. Availability of relevant information to the right people at the right time is no doubt, the key to development, since it can improve knowledge and empower the people for active and meaningful participation in their own affairs. Thus, the potentials and capabilities of the internet, through its various platforms such as the social media could be explored and exploited in this direction. Several studies have acknowledged the transformative impact of the social media. The Internet Society (2015) described it as a unique platform for innovation, creativity, economic opportunity and social inclusion which can contribute in achieving a sustainable socio-economic goals.

In recent times, the social media, through its various outlets like the Youtube, facebook, whatsapp, Twitter and so on, has changed both the process and content of information sharing. It has changed peoples relationships by creating new platforms for social engagements as well as their ability to contribute in the development process in the society. This is achieved by creating a space for more diverse political opinions, social and cultural viewpoints and a heightened level of audience participation. The power and influence of social media can be effectively engaged in improving the lives and general well being of the people. The crux of this paper therefore is to evaluate how the potentials of major social media tools can be explored for social and economic development in Nigeria.

Definition of Keywords

Development

The term development is complex and fluid, it does not have a single definition but changes depending on context, time and disposition. In general terms, development is simply a process of growth and advancement. Soola (2003), cited in Omenugha, Uzuegbunam and Eze (2018) defined development as "a process of economic and social advancement which enables people to realize their potentials, build self confidence and lead lives of dignity and fulfillment. He believes that the process is aimed at freeing people from evils of want, ignorance, social injustice and economic exploitation. It also includes political, social and economic reforms that will ensure equity and guarantee

2

opportunity for all human beings to attain their highest potentials.

The main purpose of development is for positive and desirable change. Within the socio-economic framework, development refers to the improvement within the lifestyle of the individuals through improved education, income, skill development and employment. It is the process of economic and social transformation based on cultural and environmental factors (Kapur, 2018). It refers also to the sustained and concerted actions of policy makers and communities aimed at promoting the standard of living and economic health of a specific area. It is all encompassing, involving and affecting every aspect of the society. The individual and groups (both leaders and the led) political, economic, socio-cultural, religious, infrastructural, and environmental.

Internet

The internet is described by Omojuwa (2012) as a global system of interconnected computer networks that use the standard Internet protocol suite to serve billions of users world-wide. It is the diminutive of International Computer Network (Agba, 2001). It offers a wide range of services that include electronic mail (e-mail), Internet relay chat, Usenet, search engine, Internet broadcasting, e-library, Internet telephony and video conferencing among others. So much has been said about the internet that it would be unnecessary to start dwelling on it here. It is however worthy to note that the power and influence of the internet in the contemporary world has been so monumental that majority of people across the globe have experienced the impact in one way or the other, directly or indirectly. Agba (2002) aptly summarized it as a system, which using basic telephony and broadcasting principles, allows messages sounds, film pictures and text to be transmitted simultaneously or simply from one computer anywhere in the world to another.

Social Media

Evolution of the internet provided the technological framework for the emergence of social media platform. Kapor et al, (2017), define social media as a set of information technologies which facilitate interactions and networking. It can also be defined as web-based applications which provide functionality for sharing, relationships, groups, conversation and profiles (KIetzmann et al, 2011). Social media platforms such as facebook, Twitter, Linkedln and so on, provide people with a pervasive network connectivity. The

internet based applications built on web 2.0 makes it possible for users to create and share content free of censorship and at relatively low cost.

Social media generally are perceived as tools that help to reach people, where and how they want to receive messages; they improve availability of content and may influence satisfaction and trust in the messages delivered. They also provide the opportunity to tap into personal networks and present information in multiple formats, spaces and sources which help to make messages more credible and effective. In addition, many social media channels facilitate social engagements and viral sharing of information. It is therefore, obvious that integrating social media into different communication campaigns and development activities will allow the government, civil society and all stakeholders to leverage social dynamics and networks to encourage participation, conversation and community – all of which can help spread key messages and influence informed and positive decision making.

Methodology

The method adopted for this paper was qualitative research method which relied mostly on secondary data sources obtained through desk study, online search and personal observations.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the Development Media Theory. The underlining fact behind the genesis of the theory was that there can be no meaningful development without communication. The media are expected to partner with the government in carrying out positive development programmes in politics, economic, social and cultural needs. This theory propounded by Dennis McQuail (1987), canvasses media support for the government in its efforts to bring about development. It argues that until a nation is well established and its economic development well underway, the media must be supportive and lend their weight in actualizing national goals, as reflected in government policies and programmes.

The social media are even better positioned to undertake this challenge since subscribers who are the target for development programmes will play active role in determining and communicating their developmental needs. This is against the top-down flow of information in the mainstream media, which merely impose government programmes and projects on the people.

Social Media Usage in Nigeria

4

Udodiong (2019) identified ten most popular social media websides used by Nigerians in descending order to include;

Whatsapp

Facebook

Instagram

YouTube

Facebook Messenger

Google plus

Twitter

Snapchat

Skype

Linkedln

The Digital Global Overview Report (2020), shows that digital mobile and social media have become part of everyday life for people all over the world, including Africa. According to the report, 169.2million Nigerians representing 83% have mobile phone connection in a total population of about 190.4 million, 84.9 million (42%) have internet access, while 27 million have active social media accounts. The report also shows that internet users spend average of three hours, seventeen minutes daily online. The most visited social media platforms according to

Business Insider and NCC Reports (2019) is shown in the table below;

Social Media Platform	Frequency (%)
Whatsapp	85
Facebook	78
Instagram	57
Facebook messenger	54
YouTube	53

Source:

www.pulse.ng

Social media use and growth depends on people's access to ICTs. This include availability of telecommunication networks or information highways; presence of internet access providers and cell phone operators, as well as availability of end-users equipment such as computers, modem, smart phone, tablet and so on, within and outside the home, like the workplace or public areas such as cyber centres, telecentres and availability of electricity or alternative source of power supply. However, mobile phone seems to be the main driver of social media growth.

The statistics in the table above show that less than half of the Nigerian population have internet access, while only about 27 million have active social media account. As discouraging as this may look, social media can still be very useful in reaching out to the citizenry across the country, considering the fact that about 20% of the population are below 14 years of age (Quora, 2019). Moreso, greater number of subscribers are youths who happen to be the target of almost all development efforts.

Potentials of Social Media as Development Tool

The mainstream media have always been at the forefront in communicating development projects and programmes to the populace and mobilizing them for support and participation. Use of the old media is however constrained by such factors as time, space, finance, and bureaucracy. These limitations to some extent have been reduced by the flexibility offered by the internet virtual space which grants anonymity to participants to freely engage in providing the ideas that will help motivate change and development. The social media possess a number of features which place them at a more vantage position to facilitate development in all aspects.

Dunu and Uzochukwu (2018), identified three key attributes of social media channels that make them effective mobilization tools for development to include;

- Personalization
- Presentation and
- Participation

In personalization, contents are tailored to individual needs.

In presentation, timely and relevant contents are made accessible in multi-formats and contents.

In participation, partners and the public develop and contribute content in meaningful ways.

Alabi (2013), also identified other features that make social media useful tools for development to include;

- Their ability to connect millions of voices, increase the timely dissemination and potential impact of trends and issues as they evolve in the society;
- They can leverage audience networks to facilitate information sharing;
- They can equally expand reach to include broader, more diverse audiences;

6

- They can personalize and reinforce development messages on several issues that can be more easily tailored or targeted to particular audiences;
- They facilitate interactive communication, connection and public engagement; and
- Empower people to make better informed decisions.

In addition to the above, social media also offer the advantage of allowing individual members the possibility of documenting and possessing facts and information concerning relevant issues and development which traditionally are reserved for those I authority. In this sense, social media and social networking can level the playing field by allowing a larger segment of the population to access information and influence outcome.

Development generally involves sharing of relevant ideas through effective communication from the foregoing, we can see that social media channels possess qualities and features that can facilitate development in all ramifications.

Socio-Economic Development in Nigeria – An Overview

Socio-economic development generally refers to the general well being of the people within a geographic area; it could be a community, state or nation. It addresses issue concerning the improvement and advancement of people in all facets of life, and giving the citizens the freedom and opportunity to fully explore and develop their potentials. This effort at promoting standard of living should not be a one-event programme, but continuous and sustained from one government to another, and one generation to another.

Over the years, Nigerian governments have adopted different policies and programmes, and instituted agencies with the purpose of improving lives of the citizenry and implementing the various development programmes/projects. One of the efforts of the Nigerian government at improving lives of her people was the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), later changed to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The federal government in collaboration with the state and local governments domesticated the MDGs by establishing the National Economic and Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDs), State Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (SEEDs), and the Local Economic Empowerment Development Strategy (LEEDs).

As at the end of 2007, when President Obasanjo left office and Umaru

7

Yar'Adua stepped in, it was obvious that the MDGs and their home grown versions had not accomplished their stated purposes despite huge sums of money committed into it by the federal government. In response to this situation president Yar'Adua's government evolved the "Seven Point Agenda" as a framework for steering the nation's economy towards achieving the development goals (Owolabi, 2018).

The failure of the exercise can be seen in the eroded quality of life of the Nigerian populace. Nigeria, the most populous black nation is among the countries officially described as living below poverty line, with over 40% of the population living in absolute poverty (Owolabi, 2018). There is lack of infrastructural facilities, horrible road network, irregular power supply, hunger, poverty rate is on the increase, especially with the coronavirus pandemic, which effect on Nigeria's economy is devastating and still ongoing. Crime is on the increase, due to increased rate of unemployment and low human capital development. These according to Haris (2010), were caused by poor and unaccountable governance richly demonstrated by centralized federalism and corruption.

Anya (2010) observed that there has been general consensus among policy and economic analysts that the development plans Nigeria has experimented with from the colonial era till date, had no serious error in conception and content, yet none of these efforts have yielded the desired results. Among the reasons for this failure apparently is seen in the lack of active involvement of the people in determining and implementing these development programmes. Moreso, the channels used to reach the target audience are not such that the audience could access at will and make input in content development. In fact, audience participation was almost absent, hence, their inability to carry people along to produce the expected response.

Social Media and Socio-Economic Development

Emergence of social media in the communication world has however minimized the hiccups and limitations of mainstream media which are often constrained by such factors as time, finance, space and bureaucracy. It offers the flexibility of the virtual space which grants anonymity to participants to freely engage in providing the ideas that will help motivate change and development. Moreso, social media can empower those who have the skills, access and ability to

use new technologies by helping them to break away from traditional command and control models (Hughe & Kone; 2018).

The popular social media platforms such as facebook, whatsapp, twitter can therefore be used in various ways to complement the mainstream/traditional media in improving standard of living in Nigeria. The emphasis here is on the uses that intend to improve the quality of life, individual and collective well-being as well as social progress within a community or society. They include, but not limited to the following:

Politics and Governance

Social media have built a reputation on their contribution to the democratization process in Nigeria, enabling citizens to express their views, get and share information on political activities and procedures. The various social media platforms were extensively employed in the 2019 political campaigns and elections. Government, political parties and individual aspirants, INEC, stakeholders and even mainstream news channels shared relevant information on registration of citizens, election procedure and guidelines. They helped to keep an update on the general conduct of elections, like when material were brought to the various pooling booths, when voting commenced

and when it ended, voters' turnout and the general conduct of voters, officials as well as law enforcement personnels. There were a lot of video clips uploaded and shared by the electorates exposing electoral malpractices in the various pooling booths. Such information, where properly documented will go a long way in facilitating INEC decisions on the outcome of the elections.

Good governance on the other hand depends to a large extent on the ability of government to understand the needs and aspirations of the governed, make and implement policies to address such, and be in constant touch with the people to make them understand what government is doing. This gives the people a sense of belonging and elicit support for government programmes. The social media help to bridge the gap between the government and the people. Government decisions are shared through the various platforms and government officials are at liberty to read people's comments directly from tweets and comments on twitter and facebook. This enables them to get first hand information on people's views and reactions without mediation.

People can equally expose and criticize government weaknesses and wrong doings. For example, the case of

Adams Oshiomohite, former governor of Edo State who manhandled and insulted a widow – petty trader and her wares confiscated by his taskforce. The scenario was captured by onlookers in a video clip and shared online. It attracted a lot of criticism and attacks on the governor that led to his published apology.

The Health Sector

Health is wealth. This saying cannot be more apt in this present global pandemic of coronavirus which caused a total lockdown of nations across the globe. Some nations including Nigeria are experiencing economic recession as a result of crippled economic activities. A wise government therefore will explore all possible means in safe-guarding the health of its citizens. Social media platforms have been very useful in sharing information on health matters. In the outbreak of ebola disease in 2015, and the coronavirus in 2020, social media platforms like facebook, youtube and whatsapp were massively used by the Federal Ministry of Health, World Health Organization, National Centre for Disease Control, Law enforcement agencies and other relevant bodies shared useful and comprehensive information, creating awareness on the ailments, especially prevention and treatment. Directives by federal and various state governments on safety measures to contain the spread of the diseases were extensively shared, and the people complied to a large extent.

Many healthy tips are shared on the platforms by both individuals and groups on various health issues. Health experts and professionals create sites, links/contacts to enable people reach them for professional advice. All these facilitate healthy living among the people, thereby enabling them to be productive in nation building.

Youth Engagement and Job Creation

Young people are the greatest social media subscribers, with preference for establishing friendly relationships and entertainment. Apart from that, many young people have got sustainable jobs through internet links, for instance the "Jobber-man". Some of these links maintain close relations with companies and organizations who furnish them with information on their personnel requisitions from time to time. Job seekers who submit their profiles to the links are contacted when there are job openings.

Many young people who have ICT skills are making money from developing software programs for individuals, governments and corporate organizations,

10

thereby reducing the burden of unemployment. Moreso, a number of sites and links are available through which young people can source for loans and grants from government and non-governmental bodies both within and outside Nigeria to develop and finance their skills.

Marketing and Advertising

These are economic activities that involve creating awareness, promotion and distribution of goods and services. They are closely linked to production which is at the core of economic activities. Through marketing research, producers gather information on needs, taste, financial ability and other relevant information about consumers of products and services which will enable them produce and package products to satisfy such needs, otherwise such products/services may not sale. Such information can readily be obtained on internet platforms, and this helps to avoid waste thereby enhancing productivity.

Big time marketers on the internet such as Jiji, Jumia, Ali Express etc, provide the opportunity for consumers to stay in the comfort of their homes and make orders and have same delivered at their doorsteps. Small time business people and up-starters who have no money to rent shops can display their products/services on the internet, including their contacts and have their wares supplied to those who need them. This enhances self reliance and sustenance.

Community Development

Many groups are found on the internet comprising people with common interest which may be religious, community group, ethnic group, school/alumi group etc. These groups use the social media platforms such as facebook, whatsapp etc to organize themselves and coordinate activities geared towards helping themselves, promoting their common interest and even giving back to the society. Some of them undertake community projects as may be informed by the community leaders. For instance, there is the Anambra Forum/Community in USA who organizes free medical services in Anambra State from time to time, to assist indigent Anambrarians who ordinarily cannot afford such services.

Agricultural Sector

Agriculture used to be the mainstay of Nigerian economy before oil was discovered, and having seen the need for diversification; the government has geared efforts towards resuscitating agricultural activities across the country. The ministry of agriculture, at the federal and state levels, through their agencies and extension workers pass relevant information and updates on agricultural policies, programmes and reforms as well as innovations and practices, such as availability of fertilizers, viable seeds, pest control etc. Such information are shared among members of their various individual/group social media platforms, their responses and challenges are equally made known to the agencies/ministry concerned.

Education Sector

A lot of opportunities are made available for people to develop themselves and update knowledge through social media platforms. At present, people can stay on their jobs or businesses and register and undertake academic programmes in states or countries outside their station. They can take courses online, write examinations and obtain certificates. People have met sponsors and accessed scholarship programmes online.

We are now in the era of education made easy, as people can obtain information on any aspect of human endeavour from the internet. This to a large extent facilitates teaching and learning as well as research. Even in the covid-19 lockdown, many academic institutions, both government and privately owned, secondary and tertiary, resorted to online teaching and learning which helped to save time that hitherto would have been wasted during the long period schools were closed.

Despite the many advantages and positive uses of social media in enhancing socio-economic development, they however, have a lot of abuses and challenges which seem to sabotage the positive aspect. Some of them were discussed below:

Challenges

There is low internet subscription. Statistics shows that less than 50% of Nigerian population have internet access and only about 27 million subscribe to social media. This is not encouraging as greater percentage of the population is left out in the development efforts.

A lot of fraudulent and criminal activities, incredible and misleading information are perpetuated through social media platforms, this scare people from

13

taking full advantage of and participating in programmes that are meant to improve their lives.

Electricity which is supposed to power social media facilities and gadgets has become scarce commodity in Nigeria and many people cannot afford the alternative source of power on regular basis.

Internet facilities and networks are not adequately available in some areas especially the hinterlands hence, people in such areas are left out.

Moreso, many Nigerians still live below the poverty level and are still battling with the basic needs of food and shelter. For such people, computers and smart phones to access the internet becomes luxury. Besides, buying data is expensive without which internet subscription cannot be possible.

The skills required to operate social media can be sophisticated and complex, thereby limiting the number of people who can access the networking sites.

Conclusion

The contributions of social media in transforming the various sectors of Nigeria economy cannot be over estimated. They provide all those involved in development in all sectors, as well as those who want to

impact positively in their community or society with an array of alternative media to complement traditional media and indigenous communication systems. With social media, they can get across a significantly larger audience, better targeted, without the limitations and constraints imposed by the traditional media. The social media like other communication media have their inherent weaknesses, but the benefits outweigh the weaknesses if the civil society, government and all stakeholders can effectively harness them to maximize their potentials, they will undoubtedly facilitate more sustainable development in Nigeria.
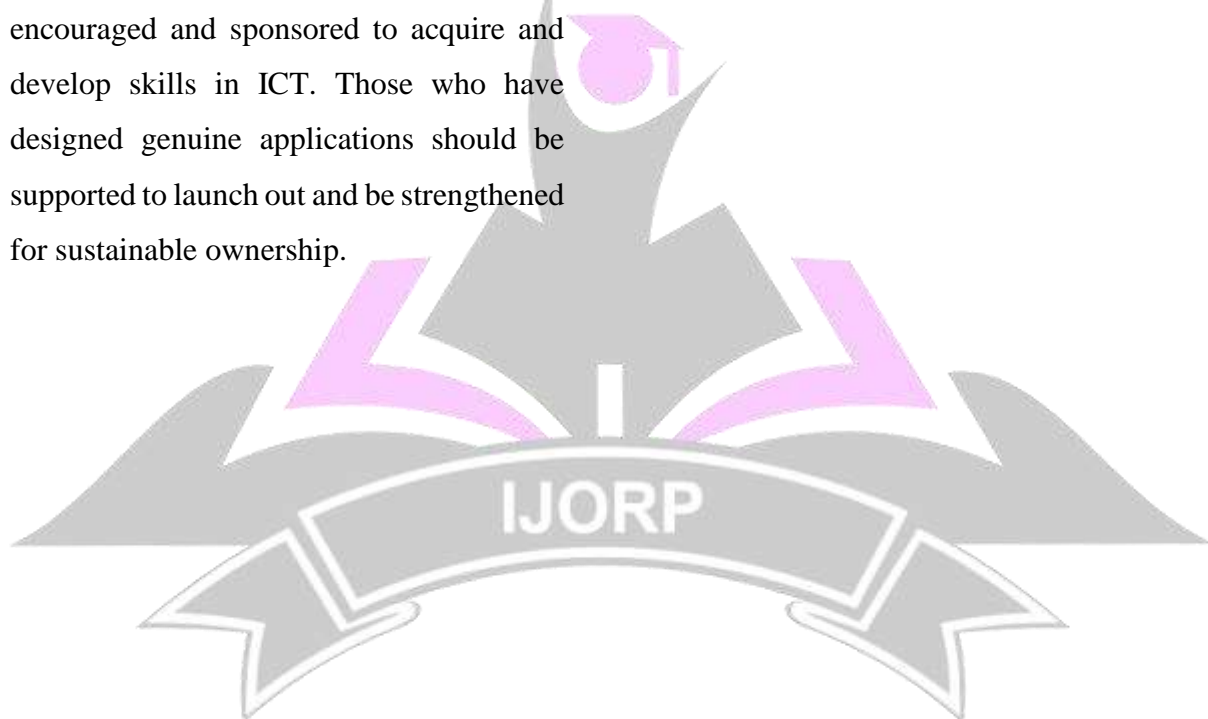
Recommendations

To achieve the desired goals in engaging social media for socio-economic goals, the government can partner with communication industries and ICT providers in subsidizing provision of facilities in the rural areas for better access and participation.

Corporate organizations, both in the private and public sector, individuals and non-governmental organizations can provide internet facilities like wifi within their operational areas at little or no cost to enhance greater participation.

The education sector and indeed, all stakeholders should embark on comprehensive internet literacy campaign to sensitize the masses, especially young people on discipline and responsibility in the use of the internet to generate social or behavioural change necessary for social development.

Young people who happen to be the greatest social media users should be encouraged and sponsored to acquire and develop skills in ICT. Those who have designed genuine applications should be supported to launch out and be strengthened for sustainable ownership.

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16

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