

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE PROPAGATION OF RELIGION AND PEACE BUILDING EFFORTS IN JOS, PLATEAU STATE

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ABSTRACT

Religion has a significant effect on people's lives. It impacts human behaviour, thoughts, moral standards, attitudes, and values. Similarly, social media has significant influence and negative impacts on the people, religion and the society, depending on how the actors and operators of each platform use the social media tool. The import of this research is to analyse the influence of the use and impacts of social media on religion and peace building efforts aimed at achieving peaceful coexistence in communities. This research adopts the desk-top strategy of qualitative research. Twenty-three source materials were analysed, to identify the strength and weakness in the use of social media tools, as well as harness possible solutions to ameliorate the weaknesses. The findings revealed that the effective and contextual use of the different social media tools enable the church to continuously educate its member, provide oversight, and help in the effective dissemination of the gospel message of peace to a wider audience, without geographical or religious limitations. Similarly, through peace building education and citizen journalism, the youth are being equipped to be useful vanguards of peaceful coexistence in their respective communities. The research recommends that the church should identify and adapt the social media tools suitable for their congregation, invest in their development progressively, conduct periodic monitoring and evaluation of content and productions quality. Furthermore, the respective communities, interest groups, concerned citizens and policy makers, should give priority to peace building education strategies, helping the youths to be active in citizen journalism and be discrete in forwarding social media content. This will enhance the communication of true stories, checkmate false information and ensure peace within the communities.

KEYWORDS: Citizen Journalism, Church, Peace building, Religion, social media, Society

INTRODUCTION

The media landscape changed radically in Africa in the 1990s because of the deregulation of the media which had been subject to strict state control. This resulted in the emergence and proliferation of new information and communication technologies (ICT) organisations. This change in the communication systems, equally influenced

significant changes in the propagation and practice of religion, within the African continent. According to Francis Nyamnjoh in his book, *New Media and Religious Transformation in Africa*, “several scholars have argued that understanding media is vital to understanding religion and the history of Christianity and other religions in Africa (4). In the same book, Brain Larkin contended that religious transformation in Africa, particularly in relation to Islam, cannot be analysed without considering the media forms that help to shape religious practices (5). There was exposure to new religious orientations via media outlets leading to changes in religious affiliation and processes of conversion evidenced in the different faith persuasions. Specifically, the leadership and Muslims youths in the Nasr Allah al-Fatih Society of Nigeria (NASFAT), adapted modern style in the conduct of their Islamic practices, similar to the typical Pentecostal churches, so that they can retain their youths and subtly convince others that both religions are the same (Nyamnjoh 12). The deregulated media scene led to the development of a marketplace of religion or religious market which has more religious options to offer than before and is much more competitive. The exposure to new religious orientation via media forms and outlets have influenced and resulted in changes in religious values, behaviours, practices, styles, attitudes, expressive modes, voices and authority. Modern media technologies provide the capacity for a greater range of religious actors and organizations to be seen and heard in the public sphere potentially supplementing and supplanting prevailing religious voices (6).

Mbithi, et al, in their paper, titled “Use of Social Media Platforms in Youth Ministry Activities by Protestant Churches in Kenya: A Case of Kesses Sub County, Uasin Gishu County”, described social media as, the combination of digital media plus mixture of moving images, sound, graphics and electronic texts to form an ordered computerised atmosphere that allow persons to work together with data to attain the necessary objectives (27-37). The use of social media has become an everyday experience, where individuals have access to Internet, using one or more social media applications (Lim, 23-41). In 2015, in United States of America, research revealed that 71.0% of youth uses more than one social media platforms, compared to 22.0% who use only one platform (Lenhart, 2015). Generally, social media has assumed the status of significant instrument for promoting community change, and specifically the religious community (Lim, 23-41). The youths have the higher prospects of coming across religious information through social media compared to what they receive from their churches and families (Mbithi, et al, 27-37). In the research effort of Brubaker & Haigh, titled “The religious Facebook experience: Uses and Gratifications of faith-based content”, the authors observed that social media is an expressive channel where users can obtain spiritual nourishment, materials and entertainment (1-7).

However, very little has been written on how to harness the potentials of the different social media tools for contextual use by different settings and how to ameliorate the challenges in their use. Thus, through detailed analysis of existing research efforts,

this paper aims to identify suitable tools for use in the church and society and proffer solutions on how to reduce the challenges of using social media tools. The preceding section of this paper provides the introduction and literature analysis. Subsequently, the research method is discussed, followed by the discussion on the research findings, culminating in the section for conclusion and recommendations.

The desk-top approach of qualitative research was adopted, in this exercise, using the ‘principle of content analysis study as tool for the analysis of the qualitative data. ‘Content Analysis Study’ as qualitative research strategy, is defined as “a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of materials for the purpose of identifying patterns, themes, or biases” (Leedy and Ormrod, 155). It is a specialised and detailed analysis that focuses on specific cluster of information, more than the conventional literature review. The process involves identifying the body of material to be studied and defining the characteristics or qualities to be examined (155). The collection of data is a two-step process. First, the researcher must analyse, sieve, and identify suitable source material for the subject under investigation. Second, the researcher must conduct detailed analysis and comparison of findings, identify patterns, similarities, themes, biases, challenges, etc, and produce the synthesis of information as results. The characteristics to be studied can be developed from existing research reports, contemporary situations relevant to the subject of study or archival documents (155).

In this research exercise, the body of materials consulted were academic research efforts published within the last fifteen years and divided into two groups, namely, the use of social media platforms for religious purposes and secondly, the use of social media as tools for peace building to achieve peaceful coexistence. In all, twenty-three source materials were consulted, to provide the synthesis of suggested advantages, disadvantages, or challenges to the use of social media in religious setting or purposes and for peace building, as well as the proffered solutions to the challenges. In the preceding sections, the literature analysis identified the advantages and disadvantages, while the synthesis of the proffered solutions is presented in the recommendation section.

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PROPAGATION OF RELIGION

Mookgo, in his article “Social media and religion: Missiological perspective on the link between Facebook and the emergence of prophetic churches in southern Africa”, identified the following as the advantages of the use of social media platforms, namely, social media provides easy access to the activities and spiritual services of the church; it serves as advertising platform and reminder about the upcoming events of the church; it creates space for interactions between members; discovery of shared identity among the platform users; it facilitate the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ, to many people within a short time at low cost; Social media can serve as a stethoscope, providing avenue for leaders to listen to the congregation and a megaphone, magnifying the individual’s ability

to proclaim God's word to the community and helps to establish and maintain relationships – helping to connect and stay connected- with members of the congregation (1-6). Similarly, Coman and Coman, observed that the use of social media platforms enhances productive interactions between believers and between believers and members of their proximate communities (131). In addition, Everton, added that social media facilitates the ease of diffusing religious ideas and practices; build networks of “faith Community” across wide geographical space, integrates people from different socioeconomic class and allows for mutual communication without coercion; activities in the different platforms play a key role in the health and subjective well-being of people of faith, because believers share appropriate scriptures while addressing issues on their platform (21). In the opinion of Al-Mosa, social media is an important platform to get the members of a society to get closer to each other, as well as helps the youths to develop useful virtues (126). Social media allows the users to create a simple, digital extension of their personal relationships and friendships (Mookgo,1-6). In the religious circle, Brubaker & Haigh concluded that the use of social media for religious communication has brought growth in many religious groups and to individual worshipers (1-7).

A significant innovative use of the modern media tools for the propagation of religion is the ease with which the activities of religious groups can be transmitted real time to a very wide audience across different geographical divides, commonly referred to as ‘live streaming’. Kgatle, in his article ‘Religious live streaming in response to corona virus disease 2019 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in South Africa’, observed that the practice of live streaming enabled the church to communicate the worship services to church members and achieve a wider coverage around the world. Furthermore, the edited version of regular sermon, other forms of teaching are documented in audio and video format, available through different social media platforms, like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc for a very long time and accessible to members and other interested persons anywhere in the world. From the basic social media platform to the most complex ones, religious group easily disseminate daily devotionals and other materials for Spiritual development. The constraints created by the Covid 19 pandemic, has brought out the potentials of live streaming into the functions of the church. In this regard, weekly activities such as, Bible study and prayer meetings are conducted real time via Zoom, video conferencing, etc, which allows active participation of church members or other interested persons, no matter the geographical location, so long as there is network connectivity. Initially, financial contribution to the operations of the church was affected by the lockdown, but with the advent of electronic fund transfer (EFT), the income of the church and other religious organisations has improved (1-6).

THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PROPAGATION OF RELIGION

There is nothing with advantages that do not have disadvantages, including the use of social media in religious functions. Several authors, identified the following as challenges to watch out for in the use of some social media platforms. Many of the Facebook users adopts pseudonyms rather than their real name and create multiple accounts. This makes it difficult to know the true members of the platform and calls for caution on the type of information communicated through such platform. Mischievous people frequently hack into the account of unsuspecting members and disseminate unfavourable information through the platform, it takes a lot of efforts to correct such errors. As much as social media helps religious organisation positively, negative information found on its platform(s) negatively impacts on the integrity and image of the organisation (Lenhart 2015; Brubakar & Haigh 1-7).

Specifically, in live streaming, Lenhart, Lim and Mbithi observed that religious organisations should be mindful of the following challenges: The difficulties of differentiating the information meant for local congregation and the public; poor network connectivity, access to data and other communication devices that limits the ability of local congregants to have access to online information from their church, whereas many people outside the geographical location with good network connectivity benefit more from the services of the local churches. Furthermore, the low quality of online productions reflects the quality of equipment and skills of the in-house IT personnel. Live streaming can be costly in terms of internet connectivity, equipment and others, making it difficult for small churches to keep pace with continuous production. Conversely, due to the low economic status of most members of some local churches, they cannot participate in some church programmes conducted through the social media. Many church members do not find fulfilment in online services, as much as they do during the physical services within the church building (Lenhart 2015, Lim 23-41, Mbithi, et al. 27-37).

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO PEACE BUILDING AND COEXISTENCE

In contemporary times, social media platforms have been found to be useful avenue for interaction and creating constructive solutions to community related challenges. According to Ogoshi, and Ukwela, in their article “The Use of Social Media as a Tool for Peacebuilding in Nasarawa State”, they identified social media as platforms for soliciting and sharing ideas and strategies for resolving conflicts, facilitate dialogue among members, propose theories and suggest best practices on how to achieve peaceful coexistence (146-154). In addition, Narula, in his work on “Role of youth in peace building via new media: A study on use of new media by youth for peace building task”, postulated that the advantages of social media, include the prospect of creating awareness among the youngsters regarding peace building tasks in society that can lead to productive

results and followed by persuading them to develop creative actions leading to peace (1-4). Uzuegbunam, et al., in their research on, “Mainstream media, social media and Peacebuilding in Nigeria: Old challenges, new opportunities?”, identified two advantages of social media as a platform of new equaliser that is breaking the information monopoly of the mainstay of government and privately-owned mass media and the platform that allows the new generation of social activists to appropriate the new media technologies and use them to create awareness, mobilise, network, share ideas, critique, vent frustrations and ultimately discursively set a new agenda for conflict resolution and peace building in Nigeria (519-524).

Nwagbara, in his work on “The Effects of Social Media on Environmental Sustainability Activities of Oil and Gas Multinationals in Nigeria”, saw that the advent of the different social media platforms have helped in democratising information dissemination and sharing (689-697). Beside the major platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, indigenous social media platforms such as Naira land, All Africa, NAIJA.com, Online Nigeria, YNaija.com, among a plethora of blogs, are in turn shaping informed ‘social-intelligence literacy’. Like the mass movement of young activist in the Arab Springs (2011) and ENDSARS, in Nigeria, 2020, the new media outlets have shown the potentials of how, activists can locally and globally push grassroots ideas, organise and coordinate action with the capacity to reach transnational audiences and to circumvent traditional top-down political hierarchies and mobilise citizens in local and Diaspora domains (Baruh, 131-139; Afolaranmi, 13-22).

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO PEACE BUILDING AND COEXISTENCE

Like many things, this new romance with technology can be abused and indeed appears to be as intoxicating as new wine. Restraint and decorum are vanishing quickly from online spaces. In a brazen new media order, liberty and expressive culture are now confused with license and capacity to insult and disparage. People could easily confuse the propensity to defame and slander for courage (Uzuegbunam, et al., 519-534). Furthermore, they postulated that, the emerging blog culture is also one of the social media engagements that favour ridicule, character smear, and abusive language. The writing style also implicates a penchant for provocation and sensationalism, something which appears to enjoy Internet users' acclaim and appreciation. The authors cautioned that commitment to nationalism does not absolve the social blogger from any responsibility to show restraint in conduct (519-534).

Other negative applications of the new media, as observed by Olabamiji in his article, “Use and misuse of the new media for political communication in Nigeria's 4th Republic” includes: The expression of ethnic and religious sentiments in the new (social) media has led to some inter-ethnic, inter-religious disputes and crisis in many parts of the country. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgents have been able to use the social media

to post gory pictures, videos of threat, murder, bombings, and other activities of the sect, to elicit support or create fear in communities (44-53). When the social media tools are used in this way it creates a state of violence and the intent of revenge which inadvertently turns the communities, state and country into a state of anarchy. With the social media platforms, negative comments, speculation, misinformation, half-truths, and rumours could be spread with little or no chance of evaluating their veracity; and in some types of crises, citizens could potentially place themselves, or others, in danger of physical or social harm (Famutimi, 2013). Igwe Emmanuel Onyeneke, aptly describe the negative impacts of social media platforms, he blamed the lingering crisis in his kingdom, Ekwulobia community in the Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, on the social media, as it is used to propagate hate and bigotry, thereby prolonging the communal feud (Ogoshi and Ukwela 146-154). As a seal on the evils of the new media outlet, Nzewi, in his work on “Nigerian Youths, Social Media Bill Regulation and the Gathering Storm: Where are the Library Services?”, observes that just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole country- sides and devastates crops, even so, uncontrolled use of the social media serves but to destroy (1-7).

DISCUSSIONS

The reality of social media or alternative media has come to stay as a complementary means of communication; it is going to expand in complexity and adoptions with time. From the analysis of the relevant literature, the advantages of adopting social media outlets outweigh the disadvantages or challenges. The church and the society should embrace this phenomenon to harness the advantages, develop constructive ways to ameliorate the challenges and provide adequate controls to reduce the abuse. The discussions, hereafter, will look at the advantages and the disadvantages.

The Influence of Social Media on the Functions of the Church

Over the centuries, the church has benefited from the use of the mass media for the propagation of the gospel of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. Similarly, in the last three decades, social or alternative media have become veritable tools in the hand of the church. Some forty years ago, the critics of the use of some mass media tools (specifically, television in Nigeria, which they called ‘the devil’s box), have become prominent actors in the use of television. The need for incorporating the use of the relevant social media tools into the services and functions of the church today cannot be over emphasised; especially in the face of many threats to the life, activities, functions of the church and the active wars against the church from different fronts, who are also using the social media and other tools. Three to four decades ago, in the different parts of Nigeria and Jos in particular, participation in church service and activities was easy, even till late in the night. In contrast, within the last two decades, due to insecurity, church activities have been negatively affected, constraining the church to close its doors about six o’clock

in the evenings, or for weeks, the church cannot meet for any function. Therefore, the church needs to take advantages in the use of the different social media tools. This is because, social media platforms provide easy access to the activities and the spiritual services of the church; it serves as a stethoscope, providing avenue to listen to your congregation, and a megaphone, magnifying the ministry of the church to the community (Mookgo, 1-6). It is important to note that, each social media platform used by the different groups within the community of faith, integrates people from all socioeconomic class, and plays a key role in the health and subjective well-being of its members, because it provides opportunities to harness constructive and Bible based solutions to common problems, without denominational colourations (Everton 1-34). Without doubt, the use of social media for religious communication has brought growth in many religious groups and individual worshippers (Brubaker & Haigh1-7). The innovative use of the appropriate social media platforms and tools, helps to bring the church closer to the members. Allowing the Live-streaming of the different functions of the church, to facilitate easy communication of sermon, daily devotionals, periodic Bible study, recorded messages in audio and video formats, as well as prayer meeting and other special programme transmitted through zoom, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc, and brings vitality to the church members and serve the wider body of Christ across denominational divides, as well as potential outreach to the unchurched population, without geographical boundaries (Kgatle 1-6).

For example, the Youth Leadership Development Foundation, based in Jos, Plateau State, conducted a prayer meeting on November 12, 2023, at 7.30pm, Nigeria time. Members of the group resident in the different locations in Jos City and environs participated. Similarly, members in the different parts of the country Nigeria, South Africa, United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America participated actively throughout the one and half hour prayer session. In the City of Jos, congregating for any meeting around 7.30pm is considered a high-risk attempt. Through the live streaming approach, those within the high-risk proximity and those in geographical distances, all participated in the prayer session, from the comfort of their homes. Many groups are using the different variants of the social media tools to enhance their functions.

The Negative Impacts of Social Media on the Functions of the Church

As much as we celebrate the advantages of the advent and contextual use of the social media platforms, it is instructive to be mindful of some of the disadvantages, which include the need to distinguish between the content of the messages meant for our local congregation, the body of Christ and the general public; thus, during live streaming, we need to exhibit greater caution. The church should be mindful of the quality of the products uploaded into the social media platforms, ensuring that the content, structure, presentations, satisfy proper editorial and relevant IT skills (Mbithi et al., 27-37).

Services through the social media are expensive, both to the church and its members. If the members do not have the suitable devices, data, connectivity and electricity, the services of the church may not benefit them as it does to others, even the international communities. Therefore, the church should adapt suitable media platforms and assist indigent members. The different platforms require periodic monitoring, evaluations, and control, to reduce the incidence of abuse (Lenhart, 2015; Lim 23-41).

The Influence of social media to Peace Building and Coexistence

The multiplication of the social media platforms has brought numerous advantages to the society, especially in developing peace building strategies that facilitates peaceful coexistence, within our communities. The multiple and composite features of the social media enable them to circumvent traditional barriers, censorship and alter the quality of debate between individuals, minority nationalities, states and international communities. It gives voice to the voiceless and serve the interest of change agents (Uzuegbunam and Omenugha 519-534). Thus, providing platform for change agents, social workers, concerned citizens, activists, to produce peace building messages in suitable visuals, video messages, films and documentaries that drive peace and development agendas, contextually suitable for the youths in the different parts of the country (Okolie-Osemene 1-9). For example, the cell phones, allows individual to have access to breaking news, within short period.

Similarly, information (positive or negative) can be transmitted and received on real time, which are not possible with the conventional media systems. On the other hand, erroneous information can be cross-checked and corrected through contacts with citizen journalist close to the scene of event (Osuigwe 15-24; Mohammed 52-77). In Nigeria, initially, Twitter platform was limited to the political and corporate elites' class, but now it has become a space where online audiences, including ordinary people, gather to engage and debate topical issues that affect them (Uzuegbunam and Omenugha 519-534). The social media platforms have created new geographies for protest and campaigns, shifting the arena to the virtual venues, able to give new versions to the traditional top-down political hierarchies, create a movement that mobilise citizens in local and Diaspora domains, without tangible leadership structure, as could be seen in the Arab Spring (2011), #BringBackOurGirls (2014) and #EndSARS 2020 (Baruh 131-139; Afolaranmi 13-22).

Negative Impacts of Social Media to Peace Building and Coexistence

Everything that have advantages, equally have disadvantages, social media inclusive. This new romance with technology is susceptible to being abused and indeed appears to be as intoxicating as new wine. Restraint and decorum are vanishing quickly from online spaces, freedom of expression is now confused with license and capacity to insult and the propensity to defame and slander are assumed as courage ((Uzuegbunam

and Omenugha 519-534). The writing style also implicates a penchant for provocation and sensationalism, something which appears to enjoy Internet users' acclaim and appreciation. Froth with the delusions that the supposed commitment to nationalism absolves the social blogger from any responsibility to show restraint in conduct (519-534). The uncontrolled expressions of ethnic and religious sentiments in the new (social) media have led to some inter-ethnic, inter-religious disputes and crisis in many parts of the country, which inadvertently turns the communities into a theatre of needless war (Olabamiji (44-53).

The assertions of Igwe Emmanuel Onyeneke, the traditional ruler of Ekwulobia community in the Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State, aptly describe the ills derivable from the negative use of the social media. His statement infers that the lingering crisis in his kingdom, is due to the negative use of the social media, as it is being used to propagate hate and bigotry, thereby prolonging the communal feud (Ogoshi and Ukwela 146-154). Similarly, Salako P (2023: Nov. 30), provided details to a news feature in Al-Jazeera, with the title: "Nigeria woman jailed for 'blasphemy' for 18 months over WhatsApp message". The story is that she shared a video post condemning the burning to death of Deborah Yakubu, a university student in Sokoto, to her co-workers. She was eventually arrested and charged for 'committing multiple offences of inciting disturbance, contempt for religious creed, and cyberstalking'. Her incarceration, since May 2022, has been a long legal battle, stress to her family, religious tension between the Christians and Muslim communities in Bauchi State, as well as the misuse of power by government agencies. Nzewi counselled that, just as an unchained torrent of water submerges several communities and devastates crops, even so, uncontrolled use of the social media serves but to destroy, more than build (1-7).

CONCLUSION

The focus of this research was to explore the influence of social media on the propagation of religion and peace building leading to peaceful coexistence in Jos, Plateau state and by extension, Nigeria. The desk-top approach of qualitative research was adopted, by conducting detailed and in-depth analysis of credible published research materials and some real-life scenarios, to identify the advantages and disadvantages of the use of social media in the activities of the church and achieving peaceful coexistence in the society. Although there were limited information specifically detailing the situations in Jos, the observed information from other places can be adapted. The findings revealed that there are numerous ways the use of the different social media tools have and is helping the course of the church and the peace building efforts in modern societies. It requires effective harnessing and contextual adaptation of the suitable tools by the church and social structure of the society.

The synthesis of the solutions gleaned from the various literature source can be adapted to improve on the positive use as well as mitigate against the negative applications

and impacts of social media to the church and society. The church will require the following actions to ameliorate the negative impacts of social media tools:

- Identify and adapt the social media platform suitable for your congregation, and progressively expand their use.
- Invest in training, skill development and IT infrastructure progressively.
- Pay close attention to the content and packaging of information through continuous editorial checks and be selective of information dissemination during online-streaming.
- Discourage member from relying on online-services and not absenting themselves from regular, in-person, worship services, where possible.

Similarly, the respective communities and Jos in particular, can adapt the following suggestions:

- Interest groups and concerned citizens, should adapt suitable strategies for peace education, using digital media technological tools relevant to each context.
- Policy makers, in Nigeria, need to consider giving peace education adequate attention and to embark on peace advocacy projects through new digital media to serve as preventive measures to intra and inter-community crisis. Provide suitable control on the operation of social medial tools.
- The youths should be trained and encouraged in the acts of citizens journalism and be discrete in forwarding news items and visuals, to reduce the incidence of conflicts.

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