

GUILTY AS CHARGED: IMPLICATIONS OF ONLINE MEDIA TRIALS ON JUSTICE DELIVERY TO THE HUMAN PERSON IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The proliferation of online media platforms has given rise to a new form of public scrutiny, where individuals are tried and convicted in the court of public opinion before being formally charged or convicted. This phenomenon, known as online media trials, has significant implications for justice delivery and the human person in Nigeria. This research examines the implications of online media trials on justice delivery to the human person in Nigeria, exploring the legal, social, and ethical dimensions of this phenomenon. Drawing upon a comprehensive review of existing literature, empirical studies and case analyses, this research examines the patterns of online media trials across various platforms, citing case studies in Nigeria. The study reveals that online media trials undermine the presumption of innocence and the right to a fair trial, leads to cyberbullying, online harassment and reputational damage, discredit the legal system and erode public trust; often prioritize clickbait and sensationalism over factual accuracy and fairness, and have significant psychological and emotional impacts on individuals and their families. The research conclude that online media trials have significant implications for justice delivery and the human person in Nigeria. This research highlights the need for a balanced approach that balances freedom of expression with the right to a fair trial and the protection of human dignity in the digital age. To mitigate the negative implications of online media trials, this research recommends legal reforms to protect individuals from online media-induced prejudice and provision of ethical guidelines for responsible online media reporting.

Keywords: Online Media Trials, Justice Delivery, Human Person, Nigeria

Introduction

In Nigeria, like much of the world, the concept of a fair trial is a cornerstone of the judicial system and a fundamental human right. A fair trial includes the presumption of innocence, the right to a defense, and the guarantee that guilt or innocence is to be determined only by a court of law after a thorough examination of evidence. However, with the staggering rise of social media as a platform for public discourse, we have also seen the rise of ‘online media trials’ where the court of public opinion often passes judgment on individuals long before any legal verdict is reached. This phenomenon of trials by media has grown to become a significant factor influencing public perception and can affect the outcome of formal judicial processes.

The pervasive nature of online trials cannot be understated. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have given rise to a new realm of instant judgment and trial. The Nigerian populace readily participates in these online discussions which often shape narratives and exert pressure on the justice system. There's mounting concern about the impact this has on the due process of law, and the implications it has on the human person accused of a crime in Nigeria. According to a study published on the nature of media trials in Nigeria, “there is an increasing trend where the public, informed by a media portrayal, forms a lasting impression about the guilt or innocence of individuals. This perception often remains unchanged regardless of the court's decision, leading to what some have termed ‘double jeopardy’ in public opinion.”ⁱ

Moreover, the UN Human Rights Office issued a statement highlighting the dangers of media trials which can undermine the right to a fair trial, a sentiment echoed by human rights organisations and legal experts in Nigeria and beyond. The fair trial principle is an essential component of human rights that extends beyond the courtroom, ensuring that individuals are treated justly

at each stage of the judicial process – including the court of public opinion.ⁱⁱ

Jones and Okanlawon provide an analysis of media influence on the judicial system in Nigeria, pointing to numerous instances where online outrages have dictated the speed at which cases are handled or even the focus of prosecution. Such influence of public sentiment on legal proceedings can hinder the discovery of truth and impact the impartiality of justice.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition, a study conducted on the interaction between social media and the justice system by Ogunmodede & Adeyemo suggests that while social media can serve as a tool for social justice advocacy, it also runs the risk of creating a biased atmosphere that jeopardizes the fairness of trials.^{iv}

Furthermore, the digital age has brought with it unique challenges where misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly online, which can unjustly sway public opinion against or in favour of a defendant.^v The speed at which information – or indeed, misinformation – can circulate on the web has unprecedented implications on the notion of 'innocent until proven guilty' in the digital era.

In contrast, there is also an argument to be made for the positive role that social media can play in shining a light on cases that may otherwise be ignored or mishandled by the formal justice system. For instance, cases that involve those in power – who might be shielded by corruption within the justice system – are brought to public attention through social media, leading to a sense of accountability.^{vi} This reflects that there is a fine line between advocating for justice and undermining the judicial process through media trials.

It is, therefore, without doubt that online media trials can have far-reaching implications on the delivery of justice to the human person in Nigeria. They shape perceptions, influence judicial proceedings, and impact the fundamental rights of individuals involved. These trials, conducted in haste on the digital platforms, often lacking the procedural safeguards of formal courts, represent a challenge that must be addressed if we are to assure fair trials remain the norm, both in the courtrooms and in the public domain.

The Concept of Online Media Trials

The phenomenon of online media trials has become a significant aspect of contemporary society, especially in the digital landscape of Nigeria. The concept of media trials, or 'trial by media,' refers to the impact of television and newspaper reporting on a person's reputation by creating a widespread perception of guilt or innocence before or after a verdict in a court of law.^{vii} Historically, the courtroom was the arena where individuals were judged, with an audience limited to those physically present. With the proliferation of the internet and social media, this audience has expanded exponentially, creating what is now known as 'online media trials'.

In the context of Nigeria, online media trials take form through social networks, microblogs, content-sharing sites, and other digital platforms where information exchanges occur at an unprecedented rate.^{viii} Here, individuals, groups, or organizations can find themselves judged by the collective online populace, with hashtags and viral content supplanting judge and jury. The issue gains complexity due to the country's rich interplay of diverse cultures, political sensitivities, and economic conditions which all feed into the way online discussions and judgments unfold. For the purpose of clarity, an online media trial in Nigeria can be defined as the process by which individuals or entities are subjected to public scrutiny through digital platforms, leading to widespread opinion-forming without the due process that is afforded in legal trials.^{ix}

These virtual courts are especially powerful in a country like Nigeria where traditional media may not reach the breadth and immediacy of coverage that online platforms do.^x Additionally, with the rise of mobile internet usage in the country, access to these platforms has increased, fuelling the reach of such trials. Recent incidents in Nigeria, such as the high-profile case of a politician accused of corruption, illustrate how quickly and forcefully public opinion can be shaped online, even before formal charges are brought forward in a court of law.^{xi}

Globally, the subject of online media trials has similarly drawn attention. The #MeToo movement is the prime example of how accusations made on social media can lead to swift public judgment and consequences for those accused, often outside of formal legal proceedings.^{xii} Closer examination of these new ‘jurisdictions’ reveals concerning implications for justice, fairness, and the right to a fair trial. In Nigeria, the debates around the topic have emphasized the tension between freedom of expression and the potential for character assassination and prejudiced legal outcomes.^{xiii}

Instances of misinformation and mob mentality in online spheres add layers of risk to the rights of those accused, particularly in a legal system that is still evolving to incorporate digital evidence and address online behavior.^{xiv} Recognizing the role of both local and international social media in shaping this phenomenon, it is evident that online media trials present not just a Nigerian but a global challenge, with implications across legal, social, and ethical dimensions. These trials can, on one hand, offer a platform for voices that might be marginalized or ignored in the traditional justice system. On the other hand, the lack of fact-checking, due diligence, and procedural protections can severely damage reputations and influence formal legal proceedings.^{xv}

Overall, online media trials in Nigeria exemplify the multifaceted issue of reconciling an age-old judicial process with emerging communication platforms that challenge traditional notions of law and order. The increasingly digital nature of our lives necessitates a balanced debate and a re-evaluation of legal principles in the face of rapidly evolving online behaviours.

The Violation of Human Rights through Online Media Trials: A Global and Nigerian Perspective

Online media trials have become a form of digital vigilantism, where netizens assemble to judge and condemn individuals based on allegations disseminated through online platforms.^{xvi} While these forums can indeed spotlight legitimate concerns, they often bypass due process and presume guilt without an official verdict, violating the right to a fair trial and the presumption of innocence.

Digital content can go viral within moments, and in cases of online media trials, the accusation itself is enough to damage reputations permanently.^{xvii} The rapid dissemination of information does not always allow for verification or context, and individuals find themselves convicted in the court of public opinion before any substantial evidence is presented. Being the subject of an online media trial can lead to severe psychological distress and mental health issues. The accused individuals often experience anxiety, depression, and, in some cases, could have suicidal tendencies, as their personal lives become public spectacle.^{xviii}

In Nigeria, the rise of social media justice through platforms such as Twitter and Facebook has led to the flagrant disregard for human rights within online communities.^{xix} The Nigerian populace, with increasing access to the internet, has cultivated a culture where individuals are subject to online 'kangaroo courts' with no formal legal protections. Online media trials encourage the trend of instant judgment, where hastiness replaces thorough investigation. The

complex narratives of each case are reduced to oversimplified summations designed for shareability, not justice.^{xx}

Globally, there have been several alarming instances where online media trials led to irreversible damage to individuals' reputations and even affected judicial proceedings.^{xxi} Such incidents demonstrate the overarching problem with digital platforms assuming the role of judge and jury. In Nigeria, the situation mirrors the global setting, with numerous cases demonstrating the perilous nature of online media trials. For example, individuals accused of corruption or moral impropriety have found themselves judged and punished by the masses before enjoying the opportunity of a fair trial.^{xxii}

A cornerstone principle in both international human rights law and the Nigerian constitution is the right to a fair trial. Online media trials skirt legal protections, jeopardizing these rights and potentially leading to actual judicial bias and miscarriages of justice.^{xxiii} The presumption of innocence until proven guilty is rendered meaningless in the face of an online media trial. Accusations on the internet are often taken as fact, leading to real-world consequences for the accused.^{xxiv}

Online media trials result in the invasion of an individual's privacy, with personal details and accusations freely broadcasted to the world without consent. This is a gross violation of the fundamental human right to privacy.^{xxv} These trials have the tendency to encourage a mob mentality, where the collective fury and judgment of the masses tend to outweigh reason and individual voices of moderation or dissent. The spread of misinformation and half-truths only exacerbates this.^{xxvi} Online media trials can also negatively affect the judicial system, perhaps causing a prejudice in jurors or influencing the judiciary, all of which undermines the criminal justice system's credibility.^{xxvii} The traditional media's

role cannot be ignored, as sensationalist reporting can add fuel to the fire of online media trials. Responsible journalism often takes a back seat to an attractive headline or viral content.^{xxviii}

Despite the positive potential of holding individuals accountable online, the lack of checks and balances on these platforms can lead to unjustified witch-hunts against individuals without credible evidence.^{xxix} It is imperative that steps are taken to protect human rights and ensure that online platforms do not become tools for indiscriminate punishment.^{xxx} Advocacy for due process and guarding against the vilification of individuals on online platforms is crucial. Civic education on the importance of upholding human rights, even in the digital realm, must be prioritized.^{xxxi}

The increase in digital literacy is essential so that internet users can critically analyze information before passing judgment or sharing content that contributes to an online media trial. (Williams, 2023). Nigeria, like many countries, grapples with adapting legislation to deal with the nuances of online media trials while preserving freedom of expression.^{xxxii} Legal frameworks must evolve to include digital jurisprudence, which appreciates the complexities of the internet and social media in relation to human rights concerns.^{xxxiii}

The youth, as frequent users of social media, need education on the ethical use of these platforms and the potential legal implications of participating in online media trials.^{xxxiv} The victims of online media trials often have limited recourse to restore their reputations or seek redress for the harm done to them, which compounds the breach of their rights.^{xxxv} False accusations that circulate during online media trials can lead to devastating consequences, not just socially but professionally and financially, for the accused individuals (Jones, 2021)

The question of data privacy and protection comes to the fore with online media trials, where private information is made public without the consent of the involved parties. Legislation must catch up to provide adequate protection.^{xxxvi} There must be a balance between protecting individuals' rights and allowing for free expression online. Internet platforms and governments are still grappling with this complex issue.^{xxxvii} Social media companies have a responsibility to ensure their platforms do not facilitate human rights abuses. Yet, content moderation and policy enforcement remain inconsistent.^{xxxviii}

Online media trials can negatively influence democratic values, such as freedom and equality, by enabling a subset of voices to speak the loudest and pass judgment without due process.^{xxxix} International cooperation is essential to develop guidelines and legislation that can be effectively implemented to safeguard human rights in the face of online media trials.^{xl} Restorative justice approaches that promote healing and resolution rather than public shaming and punishment may provide a more humane response to allegations and offenses in the digital age.^{xli} Civil society has a significant role in promoting human rights, including the proper handling of accusations and justice in online environments. Activism and education can help to foster a more just online culture.^{xlii}

Thus, online media trials have proven to be a global and Nigerian issue with serious implications for human rights. The violations that occur as a result of these digital judgments underscore the urgent need for legal reforms, increased digital literacy, and a commitment to due process and privacy rights. Consequently, it is essential that the international and Nigerian communities work collaboratively to ensure that the digital landscape becomes a safe environment where human rights are respected, rather than a court where individuals are unfairly tried and convicted without a chance for defense.

The Impact of Online Media Trials on the Justice System in Nigeria

In an era where the internet reigns supreme, the justice system in many countries, including Nigeria, faces a novel challenge – the phenomenon of online media trials. Social media platforms and various online forums have given the public unprecedented access to information and the power to influence opinions on ongoing legal cases. But what effect does this have on the due process of law? This has given rise to online media trials which have become increasingly prevalent with the rise of digital connectivity.^{xliii} The advent of smartphones and social media platforms has made it ostensibly easier for netizens to share their views and dissect every aspect of high-profile cases, often long before the courts have delivered a verdict.

Some of the impacts of online media trials on the justice system in Nigeria include:

- a. **Public Perception and Presumption of Guilt:** One of the gravest concerns is the presumption of guilt that such virtual trials often propagate. The court of public opinion rarely waits for evidence or legal scrutiny, thereby tainting an individual's reputation, potentially irrevocably, long before any legal judgment is passed.^{xliv}
- b. **Impact on the Accused:** The accused in such scenarios bear the brunt of this trend. Not only must they prepare to defend themselves in the court of law, but they also face the daunting task of managing public perception, a battle often fought on unequal grounds.^{xlv}
- c. **Prejudicing the Jury and Witnesses:** In Nigeria, the persuasion of juries and the intimidation of witnesses through online media can lead to an unfair trial. While Nigeria operates primarily a judge-based system, high-profile cases may still involve

assessors akin to jurors, who can be influenced by the media just as anywhere else.^{xlvi}

- d. ***The Right to a Fair Trial:*** The Nigerian constitution guarantees every citizen the right to a fair trial. However, when online discourse pre-empts the legal process, it creates a societal bias, which can be challenging to combat in a courtroom setting.^{xlvi}
- e. ***Contradiction with the Legal Process:*** The legal process is designed to be measured, deliberate, and above all, just. Online media trials tend to rush to judgment, often based on incomplete or falsified data, thus standing in stark contradiction with the ethos of the judiciary.^{xlvi}
- f. ***Erosion of Trust in the Judiciary:*** As more people partake in online discussions and form opinions based on circumstantial evidence, it jeopardizes the overall trust in the judiciary. People begin to question the competence and the integrity of the justice system.^{xlix}
- g. ***The Challenge of Regulation:*** Regulating online speech is a mammoth challenge. It involves balancing the right to freedom of expression with the potential harm that such unfettered expression can cause to the justice system.¹
- h. ***The Psychological Impact on Judges and Legal Actors:*** Judges and other legal actors are not immune to the pressures of online media trials. The psychological impact on these individuals can subtly influence legal proceedings in ways that might not be immediately apparent.^{li}

As such, social media companies are often at the centre of this debate. They hold the keys to the platforms where these trials by media occur, and their policies can significantly affect the

discourse.^{lii} In addition to social media, traditional media outlets also have a responsibility to ensure that their reporting does not compromise the fairness of the judicial process. They must abide by a strict code of ethics to prevent undue influence on public opinion.^{liii}

Conversely, while public scrutiny can sometimes expose legitimate flaws in the legal system, it can also derail the pursuit of justice. It is a double-edged sword that must be wielded with caution.^{liv} Sometimes, the force of public opinion can be so overwhelming that it spurs legal reforms. However, one must question if such reforms are knee-jerk reactions to public pressure or well-considered changes to the legal framework.^{lv}

Looking at how other countries deal with the phenomenon of online media trials offers valuable insights. It is not solely a Nigerian challenge but a global concern affecting justice systems worldwide.^{lvi} Enhancing digital literacy could be a part of the solution. A populace that understands the power and repercussions of their online activities is less likely to engage in actions that could impede the justice system.^{lvii} Nigeria might need to revisit its laws on contempt of court to include digital violations. The current legal framework might not be adequately equipped to handle the nuances of digital discourse.^{lviii}

The Role of Regulation in Addressing Online Media Trials

Regulations can serve as essential tools to protect individual rights in the face of online media trials. In Nigeria, the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015 criminalizes cyberstalking and online harassment, which could encompass aspects of online media trials (Federal Republic of Nigeria, n.d.). This suggests that regulation can, in fact, provide a degree of protection for individuals who may be unduly subjected to public judgment online. Although, critics often argue that regulation curtails freedom of expression, a fundamental human right

enshrined in both domestic law and international conventions.^{lix} Indeed, any attempt to regulate online discourse must reconcile the need to preserve free speech with the requirements of a fair justice system, such as the right to a fair trial, as defined by Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Recent decisions by the judiciary in various countries have indicated a willingness to impose sanctions on individuals and media outlets that prejudice legal outcomes through online commentary.^{lx} Legislative measures, such as the UK's Contempt of Court Act 1981, provide a framework for legal recourse against those who unduly influence ongoing legal proceedings, but the challenge lies in applying such frameworks to the ever-evolving digital landscape. In Nigeria, the high-profile case of a social media influencer facing online accusations highlighted the risks of mob justice, which led to calls for clearer guidelines to prevent public online trials from usurping the legal process.^{lxi} Internationally, the Amanda Knox case in Italy provided a glaring example of an online media trial with global participation, demonstrating the borderless nature of this issue.^{lxii}

Social media platforms, as primary enablers of public discourse, have a pivotal role in managing online media trials. Facebook and Twitter, for instance, have introduced policies aimed at curbing the spread of false information and harmful content^{lxiii}, but their efficacy in preventing online media trials specifically remains a matter for debate. Another angle that complicates regulation involves the public's right to know and the right to individual privacy. As seen in the case involving the alleged misconduct of business executives in Nigeria, where public interest was high, the tension between these rights became quite pronounced.^{lxiv}

The responsibility of journalists and media outlets is crucial in this context. Ethical guidelines, such as the Editors' Code of Practice in

the UK, caution against publishing material that could compromise a fair trial.^{lxv} Journalists should thus balance public interest against the potential harm to the individuals involved. To prevent contamination of the jury pool or undue influence on court proceedings, there have been suggestions to limit online discussions during active trials. A high-profile case in South Africa saw a temporary social media blackout to uphold the integrity of the legal process.^{lxvi} However, the issue of jurisdiction stands as a significant impediment to regulating online media trials, which is evident in a Canadian case that had worldwide online ramifications, transcending national borders.^{lxvii}

Beyond legal concerns, online media trials can have severe mental health implications for those involved, leading to instances of depression, anxiety, and even suicide.^{lxviii} Thus, regulations also need to address the social repercussions that follow online vilification. In the digital age, technology itself can offer solutions. The use of algorithms to flag and limit the spread of prejudicial content has been proposed as a viable method to control online media trials without impeding freedom of speech.^{lxix}

When evaluating existing laws, such as Nigeria's Cybercrimes Act, the central question remains how effectively they are enforced in the context of online media trials (Federal Republic of Nigeria, n.d.). Without robust enforcement mechanisms, even the most well-crafted regulations become essentially toothless. Public education is a potent tool in mitigating the phenomenon of online media trials. Informing the general populace about the potential harm of their online conduct in relation to legal cases is crucial.^{lxx} This approach promotes self-regulation and a more conscious use of digital platforms.

Thus, regulation plays a fundamental role in balancing the rights and freedoms at play within online media trials. The Nigerian context, as well as the broader international scene, provides lessons

on the complexities and necessities of such regulation. Flexibility, adaptation to technological advancements, and proactive approach by all stakeholders, including governments, social media platforms, and civil society, are essential to ensuring that the regulation of online media trials is both effective and respectful of individual freedoms.

Instances of Online Media Trials in Nigeria

Some of the notable cases of online media trials include:

1. **The D'banj Alleged Rape Case:** In June 2020, Nigerian musician D'banj was accused of rape by a woman named Seyitan Babatayo. What followed was a frenzied online trial, with hashtags and counter-hashtags trending on social media platforms, particularly Twitter. Before any conclusive legal action could be taken, opinions were polarized, and judgements were passed in the public sphere.^{lxxi} The implications for justice delivery in this instance were profound. The online trial likely affected the official investigation as law enforcement and the judiciary could be swayed by the weight of public sentiment. Furthermore, it compromised the accused's right to a fair hearing, as stipulated by Article 36 of the Nigerian Constitution.
2. **The Busola Dakolo Case against Pastor Biodun Fatoyinbo:** Another profound instance was the accusation of rape against Pastor Biodun Fatoyinbo by Busola Dakolo, the wife of popular Nigerian musician Timi Dakolo. Almost immediately, social media was awash with the allegations, and a verdict was seemingly reached by many before any legal proceedings.^{lxxii} In a similar vein to the Dakolo case, social media played judge and jury to the allegations against the pastor of the Commonwealth of Zion Assembly (COZA). In the court of public opinion, the accused was either vilified or defended vehemently, with little regard for the legal process.^{lxxiii} This instance underscored the

dangers of trial by media in that it can disrupt the objective gathering of evidence, hinder the willingness of witnesses to come forward in a highly publicized, polarized environment, and cast aspersions on the characters involved, in some cases causing irreparable damage. This trial by media poses a risk of 'mob justice,' where the accused is punished by society despite the lack of a legal conviction, thus impinging upon the rights of the accused to a presumption of innocence and undermining the legal principle that an individual is innocent until proven guilty.

3. **The Senator Elisha Abbo Assault Case:** A viral video showing Senator Elisha Abbo assaulting a woman in a sex toy shop brought the Senator under severe media scrutiny and a barrage of online criticism. The online community was quick to condemn him, impacting the Senator's case's actual legal adjudication.^{lxxiv} This online media trial highlighted the tension between public interest and private rights. While it served to bring attention to issues of abuse and misconduct, the media trial's prejudicial nature potentially tainted juror impartiality and public perception, risking miscarriages of justice.
4. **The Omoyele Sowore Case:** Political activist and journalist Omoyele Sowore was arrested and charged with treason in 2019 following his call for nationwide protests against the government. The case quickly gained traction online, with netizens around the world discussing and dissecting the charges and implications for Sowore.^{lxxv} The fervent online debate highlighted the potential of social media to serve as a platform for public pressure on government institutions. However, the online media trial also demonstrated the ability of digital spaces to spread misinformation, influence public opinion unduly, and potentially prejudice the case, which compromises the right of every accused individual to a fair trial.

These instances of online media trials in Nigeria illustrate an ongoing conflict between public interest, facilitated by digital platforms, and the traditional pillars of justice delivery. While social media can serve as an important tool for awareness and even accountability, the precipitate rush to judgment often undermines the legal process, arguably impinging upon the rights of the accused. Online media trials can fuel a culture of 'guilt by association' and tarnish reputations, sometimes irreversibly, without the due process of law. As Nigeria grapples with the intersection of technological advancement and justice delivery, it becomes crucial for legal frameworks to evolve and for digital literacy to be promoted among the citizenry. The delicate balance between ensuring justice and upholding the rights of individuals necessitates a careful, responsible engagement with online platforms. It is therefore imperative that all stakeholders in Nigeria's justice delivery ecosystem work collaboratively to mitigate the risks posed by online media trials to ensure that the scales of justice remain balanced in the age of digital immediacy.

The Need for a Balanced Approach to Justice Delivery in the Digital Age

In the contemporary world where digital innovation reigns supreme, the delivery of justice has been caught in the whirlwind of transformation. The digital age presents unprecedented opportunities and challenges for the legal systems worldwide, urging them to adapt to new realities. As we navigate through the vast ocean of information, legal processes also require thorough modernization to match the pace of society's digitization. The necessity for a balanced approach in justice delivery is paramount, not just to harness technology's potential but also to mitigate its risks.

Such balanced approaches to justice delivery in the digital age include:

1. ***Understanding and Embracing the Digital Courtroom:*** The concept of digital justice is not new. For years, courts have been utilizing technology to improve efficiency, from electronic filing systems to video conferencing for remote hearings. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this transformation, as courts were thrust into a position where digitization became a necessity, not just an option. The swiftly arranged virtual hearings showcased the flexibility and potential continuity of justice even in the face of societal disruptions.
2. ***Navigating Digital Evidence and its Complexity:*** As the digital footprint of individuals expands, so too does the complexity of evidence. Digital evidence, ranging from emails and text messages to complex data analytics, has become central to both civil and criminal proceedings. However, without the appropriate legal and technological expertise, the risk of misinterpreting evidence increases, as does the potential for miscarriages of justice. It underscores the need for a justice system that is as proficient in technology as it is in law.
3. ***Cybersecurity and Confidentiality or Data Security:*** The integration of technology into the justice system brings cybersecurity to the forefront. Concerns about the confidentiality of sensitive information and the integrity of court processes are paramount. Cyberattacks could compromise not only individual cases but the public's trust in the judicial system. Protecting data integrity is a crucial component of delivering justice in the digital age.
4. ***Addressing the Digital Divide:*** Moreover, the digital divide, the gap between those with effective access to digital and information technology and those without, has significant implications for justice delivery. Without measures to ensure

equitable access to digital resources, the justice system risks marginalizing those who are less technologically adept or lack sufficient resources. This digital chasm could otherwise undermine the principle of equal justice under law.

5. ***Adopting Artificial Intelligence in Decision Making:*** The rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has prompted debates regarding its role in the judiciary. AI has the potential to improve the speed and consistency of legal processes. However, reliance on such technology also raises ethical concerns and the possibility of opaque decision-making processes.^{lxxvi} Maintaining a balance between human judgment and technological aid is crucial to ensure justice remains fair and transparent.
6. ***Remote Hearings and Personal Interaction:*** While remote hearings offer numerous advantages, including convenience and reduced costs, they can also diminish the human interaction that is often critical in legal proceedings. Personal nuances, non-verbal cues, and the solemnity of the courtroom environment can be lost in translation to a digital medium. Ensuring that the digital facilitation of justice does not strip away the human element is vital.
7. ***Digital Literacy in the Legal Profession:*** The judiciary and the legal profession must also evolve. Digital literacy is no longer an optional skill but a necessity. Lawyers, judges, and court personnel require ongoing training to adapt to the evolving digital landscape and to mitigate the risk of technological obsolescence. This training must be integrated into professional development programs to maintain a justice system that is competent in both legal and digital domains.
8. ***International Collaboration and Uniform Standards:*** Justice delivery in the digital age cannot be siloed within national

boundaries. Cybercrime, data breaches, and digital evidence often have transnational dimensions. Consequently, international collaboration and the development of uniform standards are essential to address cross-border legal challenges effectively.^{lxxvii} A concerted global effort is necessary to ensure justice delivery is robust against the challenges of digitalization.

9. ***Balancing Act and the Role of Legislation:*** Striking the right balance requires thoughtful legislation that both leverages technological advancements and safeguards legal principles. Regulations must be forward-looking, flexible, and crafted to address the evolving landscape of digital justice. Bridging the gap between technology and law through a balanced regulatory framework is crucial for ensuring that the justice delivery system remains resilient^{lxxviii}

Thus, the advent of the digital age has augmented the landscape of justice delivery in ways that are transformative yet fraught with challenges. For a justice system to be equitable, efficient, and secure in the 21st century, a balanced approach is imperative. Courts and legal professionals must embrace technological tools while preserving the solemnity, personal interaction, and fairness that lie at the heart of justice. The digital divide must be bridged to ensure universal access to justice. Legislators, in collaboration with technologists, must create regulatory frameworks that foster the seamless integration of technology into the justice system while mitigating potential risks. Only through such a balanced approach can we ensure that justice delivery in the digital age remains true to its foundational principles of fairness, integrity, and equality before the law.

Recommendations:

1. The Nigerian government should establish a regulatory body to monitor and control online media content, particularly regarding criminal cases.
2. The National Judicial Council and the Nigerian Bar Association should develop guidelines and protocols for legal professionals on managing online media trials.
3. Law enforcement agencies should be trained on handling online media trials and protecting the rights of accused persons.
4. Public awareness campaigns should be launched to educate citizens about the dangers of online media trials and the importance of respecting the legal process.
5. Support services, such as counselling and legal aid, should be made available to accused persons and their families.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of online media trials in Nigeria has far-reaching implications for justice delivery and the human person. This study has demonstrated that online media trials undermine the presumption of innocence, compromise the integrity of the judicial system, and violate the right to fair trial. The findings of this research highlight the need for urgent attention to this issue, as online media trials can have devastating consequences for the mental health and well-being of accused persons, their families, and the wider community. In Nigeria, where the legal system is already grappling with numerous challenges, online media trials exacerbate the problems of justice delivery. The Nigerian government, legal professionals, and media stakeholders must work together to address this issue. This requires a multifaceted approach that includes regulatory measures to curb the spread of false and

misleading information on social media and online platforms, education and awareness campaigns to sensitize the public about the dangers of online media trials and the importance of respecting the legal process, training for legal professionals and law enforcement agents on the implications of online media trials and how to manage them effectively and support services for accused persons and their families to mitigate the negative impacts of online media trials. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the need to prioritize the dignity and rights of the human person in the pursuit of justice. Online media trials must not be allowed to compromise the integrity of the judicial system or undermine the fundamental human right to fair trial. By working together, we can ensure that justice is served without compromising the well-being of the human person.

ENDNOTES

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