

THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN YOUTHS' PROTESTS AND AGITATIONS: AN INTERROGATION OF CIVIC ACTIVISM IN #ENDSARS

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ABSTRACT

The digital age, with its new media, has brought transformation and innovation to information transmission. This has not only diversified communication routes but also made it easily accessible to people in a globalised community. It has created a means through which people express themselves and share ideas, especially regarding happenings in the world around them. The new media has also introduced a new dimension to protest culture among citizens, especially youths. The #EndSARS protest of 2020 against police brutality and Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), unfortunately, turned tragic and has left a twist in the youth's unrest and protest culture in Nigeria. Youth grievances further spurred the protest focused on other discontent situations, such as poverty, unemployment, non-inclusion in governance, poor infrastructure, and insecurity. This paper focuses on new media as a popular phase of digital technology. It probes the use of new media, its effect, success, and challenges within the context of the #EndSARS protest. Furthermore, it examines the role of the new media in propelling, coordinating, and organising the protest and the protesters. To achieve this, the study adopts a quantitative research method through a questionnaire designed as a research instrument to gather data from youths (18-39) who are the target audience. The questionnaire investigated the role of the new media during protests and examined how digital technology has become central to recent civil agitations among Nigerian youths. The findings of this research establish that social media platforms have transformed civil protests in the digital age. It also reaffirms the role of digital platforms in connecting, transforming, and revolutionizing protests and agitations for the present and the future. The paper concludes that if properly harnessed by youths and the Government, the new media will become a pedestal to build a new generation of patriotic, responsive, and active citizenship in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS: #EndSARS, New Media, Protest Culture, Civic Activism, and Agitation.

INTRODUCTION

Civic activism has been on the increase around the world since the 21st Century. A readily available explanation is the decline of good governance, especially in Africa. Civic activism may include organised groups or individuals who share the same opinions or share a range of ideological positions, mostly struggling to oppose resurgent authoritarian and illiberal government policies. It is aimed at promoting a communal good life. Hence, there is a conscious awakening of citizens who might have been docile or inactive by mobilising them for public awareness on issues demanding attention and pushing them into the public sphere through protests, media coverage, strikes, etc. Civic activism is deeply rooted in specific national issues and may result in a boycott of duty, petitioning elected officials, holding rallies, street marches, or strikes. Civic activism is more intentionally prioritised in literacy scholarship and practice. Activism is closely related to concepts around voice, agency, and participation (Mihailidis, 2019: 2).

Protest culture is not strange in Nigeria; it is part of the lifestyle of the society. Right from the pre-colonial traditional societies, to the colonial and post-colonial eras, people have always risen against tyranny, oppression, and suppression. Protests are demonstrations, agitations, and reactions by the citizens to draw the attention of the government or superiors to issues of concern. In the face of tyranny, despotism, oppression, and suppression by the elitists or the ruling class, protests have been the way out. Many African societies have, at one point in time, faced overbearing leadership and have engaged in protests to make their grievances known to authorities. In Nigeria, there has been a record of protest culture to stand up to draconian rule, unwholesome reforms, and policies that affect the well-being of citizens. At some points, these protests were spearheaded by sections or members of the society based on the direct impact of the not-too-pleasant conditions. Originally, protests took place in public places like streets, markets, institutions, etc, and involved the use of posters, flyers, placards, customised dresses, and so on. By the 20th century, Nigeria began to witness an increase in protests organised by the masses to agitate against unfavourable government policies. What makes this study germane is not just a study of protest culture in Nigeria but its evolution with the coming of the digital age in the 21st century. Previous protests have always adopted a purely physical approach, which poses inhibitions to a wide reach. Examples of such protests are the Aba Women riot in 1929, the Egba Women's revolt, which Kuti (1947) states that both were caused by high taxes imposed on women by the then-colonial administration. Others are the "Ali Must Go" riots (1978), SAP riots (1989),

and the June 12 protests against an annulled election said to be in favour of MKO Abiola (1993) (Adisa, 2021).

Nigerian youths, in October 2020, changed the face of protests and agitations forever in the history of the country and probably Africa. They were able to maximise the potential of the new media, which they were familiar with, to outwit the government in a civil online activism. This new dimension to protest marked the beginning of a new protest culture, which is mutating daily. There is an increase in social media activity and protests in contemporary times. New media users have become involved in online civil activism by engaging various social media platforms to communicate and transmit information. This new engagement has given a new face to protest culture in Nigeria and the world. Traditional modes of organisation in social movements (with structural features like identifiable leaders and persistent collective identities) have been largely replaced by more distributed emergent mass user activity enabled by social media platforms (Bennelt and Surgurberg, 2013, Castells, 2012, Mergetts et al., 2016, cited in Poell and Dijck, 2017, p. 546).

WHAT IS THE NEW MEDIA?

The emergence of the new media is crucial to protests, especially among youths who are the dominant users of social media platforms. It has become a safe community for solidarity, cooperation, and togetherness for a set of common values. The new media has opened new opportunities for mass mobilisation and a new type of action to address key issues of joint interest among youths. It provides an opportunity for a widespread protest at almost zero cost through microdonations, large-scale data analysis, information sharing, mobilisation, and common interest. Most new media protests among youths could be politically engineered, self-motivated, or collective action. To advance opinions during a protest, many tactics are employed. Some include promoting hashtags (#), accounts, data collection on social media platforms, and adopting different languages for public addresses (Lotan et al, 2011). Such protective tactics employed during the Arab protest extended to social media, street marches, through organised communication strategies, and the connection of people of diverse opinions by giving them a common front for joint activism. (Della Ratta & Valeriani, 2012).

The new media technology “encompasses a wide variety of web-related communication technologies, such as blogs, wikis, online social networking, virtual worlds, and other social media forms” (Friedman and Friedman, 2008). Friedman and Friedman further identified the five Cs, which are critical characteristics of the

new media, known as “communication, collaboration, community, creativity, and convergence”. Some forms of the new media are categorised as:

Blogs: Boggar.com, Technorati.com

Social networking: Myspace.com.facebook.com, Friendster.com

Social bookmarking: del.Icio.us

Wikis: Wikipedia.com

P2p filesharing: Bittorent.com

Video clips, mashups: youTube.com; Goggle video

Virtual worlds: second life.com; webkinz.com

(Friedman and Friedman, 2008)

The term ‘new media’ is derived from a key word, ‘media’, which implies a medium for transmitting information, which in today’s world is through technology. The addition of the word ‘new’ to media signifies information that is time-bound through various media of information technologies. It is therefore worth noting that communication is a major component of the new media. This further emphasises that collaboration, digitalisation, and telecommunication represent an emergence of diversion and competition for the world media that is time-bound. One outstanding feature of the new media is its use of computers for the dissemination of information. The new media is an era of conscious technology in media to change the existing norm, making it radical. This new revolution without prejudice creates a more profound space for innovation, cost efficiency, and accessibility to a vast audience, giving it a wide coverage. These are perhaps some of its outstanding features that make it endearing, particularly to youths in the 21st century. This movement, which evolved in the 19th century, has infused radical changes in the communication landscape and architecture.

THE NEW MEDIA AND THE # ENDSARS PROTEST

The #EndSARS protest in October 2020 was a movement by Nigerian youths, necessitated by the government's unresponsive attitude to governance issues affecting young people. Studies reveal that youths in Nigeria amount to approximately 34% of the entire population, thereby positioning Nigeria as one of the largest youth-populated countries (Okunna, 2021). This agitation was caused primarily by injustice, brutality, abuse of human rights, torture, and killings meted out on Nigerian youths by the Nation’s security apparatus, particularly the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Other underpinning factors include unfavourable government policies, unemployment, lack of access to social amenities, incessant strikes by tertiary institutions, insecurity, deprivation, and a host of others. The

protest started on the streets of Lagos with a few youths, but later snowballed into a national movement. Activities of the protesters were organised and coordinated through new media to disseminate information, defining the protest as technology-based. The new media made the #EndSARS protest visible, loud, and clear in Nigeria and the entire world. The government's lack of proactive measures to promptly address these grievances led to more crises that put Nigeria on the front burner for a long time. This paper is not an attempt to re-enact the #EndSARS protest; rather, its focus is on the new media as a medium of engagement for protest and civil activism.

The new media was a convenient tool used during the #EndSARS protest as an interactive medium, connecting youths. This indicates that the new media is essential for the mobilisation of protest action in every social movement (Moradum, Yar'Adua, and Msughter, 2021). With the digitalisation of ICT in the modern world, protests have found new means of expressions in Nigeria. The effectiveness of the new media during #EndSARS made a lot of impact on the society. Ajisafe, Ojo, and Mongani (2021) highlight some of these impacts.

- Obtaining information, share, and exchange thoughts irrespective of status, personality, or location
- Directing access to information without interference
- Critical tool in organizing and coordinating social movements
- Replacing the traditional medium of information by restricting social movements
- Enabling validation of information without media bias

As a result of the exposure and image given the country using the new media during #EndSARS, the Nigerian government came up with restrictions on the use of the social media. The Ministry of Information and Culture expressed displeasure at the use of microblogging and suspended Twitter (X), an arm of the new media that was popularly used. A decision was reached directing the Nigeria Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to commence licensing of all Over the Top (OTT) and social media operations in Nigeria (Ajisafe et al, 2021). These actions were seen as a violation of human rights and were constantly and consistently berated within and outside the country. The new media during the #EndSARS protest was a game-changer, and government policies for youth development must be rightly promulgated and executed. The new media remains a strong force to be reckoned with even after the #EndSARS protest, as it has become a leveller and meeting point between the government and the governed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories were adopted for this research. These are Participatory Culture Theory by Henry Jenkins and Technological Determinism Theory. Both are examined within the context of this study to situate the research succinctly.

Participatory Culture Theory

Henry Jenkins popularised the Participatory Culture Theory in the early 2000s. It was initially developed for television fandom, like community building, emotional investment, cultural impact, fan activities, creativity, and participation. This concept celebrated the shift from mass media to the forms of networked communication that could empower consumers to become creators and distributors (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Castells, 2009). It is further defined as one that focuses on these different online cultures and how people interact and engage with them over time as technology and social networking advance (Nubin, 2021). Jenkins describes the participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.” He further describes it “as one in which members believe their contribution matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another” (Jenkins, 2006). Some examples of how this connection or engagement is achieved online include: connecting with someone about something that someone else has posted/created online, producing content yourself, affiliation with an online community, formal or informal membership of a group within a social network or just the platform itself, or collaboratively working in teams to solve certain problem in the workplace or society (Nubin, 2021).

This theory has various forms in which it is employed: Affiliation (it involves membership, both formal and informal in online communities which centres on forms of media like Facebook, My Space), Expressions (it has to do with producing new creative forms like fan video making, fan fiction writing to mention a few), Collaborative Problem-solving (it entails working together in teams, formal or informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge), and Circulation (it deals with shaping the flow of media using ways like podcasting and blogging) (Jenkins, 2006). This paper employs this participatory theory to discuss the role the new media played in the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria. It examines the new media used and their impact on the protest. Some of the new media channels used by some celebrities, which contributed to the success of the protest, will also be in focus. Similarly, some of the forms used, such as Expression and Collaborative Problem-

solving, which impacted the success or failure of the #EndSARS protest, will be highlighted.

Technological Determinism Theory

This is defined as the belief that technology is the principal initiator of society's transformation. Thorsten Veblen, an American sociologist, is acknowledged for taking the lead in the emergence of this theory and for formulating the causal link between technology and society. This theory was established in the early 20th century, with two different branches: radical and moderate technological determinism (Hauer, 2017). In the radical version, the technologies represent a prerequisite for changing society, while the moderate form only regards the technology as a key factor that may or may not mean change. Castell also defined this theory as a two-way process called social embeddedness, which emphasises technology as a social process, whereby society is informed by technical change, and the technical change is shaped by society (Hauer, 2017). The technological determinism theory was employed in this study to highlight the relationship between the new media and social change, using the #EndSARS protest as a case study. It also examined the link between some forms of the new media and Nigerian society during the #EndSARS protest.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main thrust of this study is hinged on the following key questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of protesters of the new media?
2. In what ways was the new media a determining factor in participation and involvement in the #EndSARS protest?
3. How did information dissemination on social media platforms affect the #EndSARS protest?
4. To what extent did the new media affect the outcome of the #EndSARS protest?

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research method. The instrument used is a questionnaire distributed online through Google Forms to various WhatsApp groups, from which respondents were drawn. The pool of data is drawn from randomly selected youths between the ages of 18 and 39 who are active users of the social media platforms. Some are students, small-scale entrepreneurs, while others are civil

servants in Lagos State. The questionnaire consists of twenty items to address four research questions raised for the study

FINDINGS

Fig. 1

Category	Description	Percentage/ Number
(Demographics)		
Total Respondents	Number of participants in the study	97
Gender (Male)	Percentage of male respondents	54.6%
Gender (Female)	Percentage of female respondents	43.3%
Age Range (18-39 years)	Respondents within the desired age range	48.5%
(New media awareness and usage)		
Awareness of the new media	Respondents are aware of the new media	64.9% (initial claim)
Awareness of the new media (All respondents)	All respondents who claimed awareness of the new media	100%
Social media platform used	Platforms listed (e.g., Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube)	14 Platforms
Average platforms used per respondent	Minimum number of media platforms used by each respondent	6 platforms
#End SARS Protest engagement		
Online #EndSARS protesters	Respondents who participated in online #EndSARS protests	30.9%
Use of platforms for protest	Protesters using all listed platforms to comment, like, share, repost, etc.	30.9%
Impact of the new media on protest	Respondents agreed that the new media was impactful	87.6%

Community creation for protest	Respondents confirmed that a community was created for the protest	69.1%
(Challenges during #EndSARS protest)		
Fake news and manipulation	Respondents believe fake News and manipulations occurred	69.1%
Government Control and Regulation	Respondents affected by government attempts to control the new media	48.5%
(Perceived outcomes and reforms)		
The new media as a platform for agitation	Respondents agree that the new media is effective for protests and influencing opinions	83.5%
Policy reforms for youths	Respondents believe the protest led to youth-related policy reforms	83.5
Government acceptance of demands	The federal government accepted all protesters' demands, including scrapping SARS	100% (outcome)
Establishment of panels	Panels were created to address the brutality of uniformed personnel	100% (outcome)
Success rating of the protest	Respondents who rated the protest as a success	30.9%

The table above explains the findings of the research. A total of ninety-seven (97) respondents took part in the study, of which 54.6% are males and 45.3% are females. A total of 48.5% of the respondents are between the age ranges of 18-39 years, which is the desired age range for the study. A large percentage of 64.9% are aware of new media. Also, respondents listed some social media pages that they use in the new media. They include Facebook, blogs, online streaming, Twitter (X), Instagram, LinkedIn, Google, Yahoo, WhatsApp, YouTube, Reedit, Snapchat, Telegram, and TikTok. At least each respondent engages use of six out of the mentioned new media platforms. All respondents (100%) claimed to be aware of new media, while 30.9% were online #EndSARS protesters and made use of all the listed platforms to comment, like, share, repost, or retweet information, while 87.6% agreed that new media was impactful on the #EndSARS protest. Although 69.1%

confirmed that a community was created for the protest, at the same time, 69.1% respondents believed that there was fake news and manipulation of facts during the protest, which led to offline actions. 83.5% agree that the new media is a good platform for agitations and protests to influence public opinions and actualise reforms. The government's attempt to control and regulate the new media during and after the #EndSARS protest affected engagements with 48.5% respondents, while 83.5% think that the protest brought about reforms in policies about youths. First, the federal government accepted all the demands of the protesters, including the immediate scrapping of SARS, which was a major achievement. Second, there was the establishment of panels to revisit issues related to brutality by men in uniforms. Despite these landmark achievements, only 30.9% rated the protest a success despite the many appeals of new media.

DISCUSSION

There is an overwhelming awareness of new media among respondents who took part in the study. However, it is obvious that males are more adherents of new media than females. Reasons for this could not be ascertained since it was not within the scope of the study but in a study by Oyesomi, Nelson, and Omole (2014), they concluded that women are more inclined to engage in empowerment activities on social media. The #EndSARS protest was further propelled by new media by creating a platform for the transmission of information, even though users also affirmed that the spread of fake news and propaganda was at its peak. New media at this stage was a powerful force rather than the conventional media coverage by television, radio, and print media. It built a community of common interest for protesters and has evolved into a norm for subsequent protests after #EndSARS, where civil activism, social protests, and agitations take place. Sule in Akerele-Popoola's (2022) report on "Different Agenda, One Goal: How Nigerians United to #EndSARS" buttresses the social connective power of new media. Initially, organisers and coordinators of the protest were faceless until the involvement of celebrities and personalities who amplified the protest globally. Participation by Nigerian celebrities like DJ Switch, Mr. Macaroni, Burna Boy, Tahoma, non-government organisations, companies, groups, and international figures like Twitter CEO (Jack Dorsey), Beyoncé, and Rihanna is a reinforcement that the new media is a means for liberation from oppression, dictatorship, corruption, and bad governance. On the other hand, new media could spell doom if not well managed or used arbitrarily, especially misinformation as seen in #EndSARS, which led to street actions, hooliganism, destruction of properties, looting, bodily injuries, and death.

Lagos State turned out to be the centre of the protest, which was well-coordinated until the night of 20th October, 2020, when there were reports of shooting at Lekki Toll Gate by military operatives and the killing of some protesters in a bid to put an end to the protest. The aftermath of the spread of this information on social media platforms erupted in a fresh revolt characterised by wanton disruption of social life and destruction of properties. At this point, there were claims that the protest had been hijacked by thugs, street urchins, and area boys in the ensuing violence and anarchy, particularly in Lagos, many were caught up in the violence, innocent citizens and policemen were killed, public infrastructure and private properties were set ablaze, leading to losses estimated at several billions of naira. This act of destruction was replicated in some other South-Western States too. In response to a similar occurrence marked by the recent upsurge of protest by Kenyan youths, Kagwe (the Secretary of the Agriculture Cabinet) in Mwangi (2025) warns against infiltrations of ‘...peaceful Gen Z-led protesters by criminal elements intent on causing chaos and destruction’. He further affirms that vandalism reflects terrorism and not the spirit of true civic demonstration. He states categorically, ‘those who loot supermarkets and attack public buildings are not the youth who are peacefully demonstrating. These are criminals taking advantage of the moment.’ This explains actions taken by the Federal Government of Nigeria to stem the tide by stepping in to meet the demands of the youths during the protest. This resulted in the setup of Judicial Panels in twenty-nine (29) States of the Federation. These independent bodies were to investigate cases of police brutality and prosecute culprits of all reports of police misconduct to ensure justice for victims of the proscribed Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS).

The constitution of the panel in Lagos State included women and men who were government representatives, security personnel, civil society, human rights activists, and youth representatives, and was chaired by the Honourable Justice Doris Okuwobi. They were saddled with the responsibility of identifying victims of police abuse and extra-judicial killings of disbanded SARS, investigating petitions of police brutality and extra-judicial killings in Lagos State, and evaluating shreds of evidence to arrive at conclusions. Other terms of reference included investigating the Lekki Gate shooting, recommending compensation for deserving victims or their dependents, and interrogating serving or dismissed officers who are responsible for human rights violations. Above all, they were expected to make recommendations to forestall future occurrences of human rights violations by police in Lagos State. The sittings revealed a lot of brutality by the police force and other security agents against civilians. Oral and written petitions were presented through tendered evidence and footage of brutal beatings, destruction of properties, damage to phones,

and maiming of victims. #EndSARS protesters also had the opportunity to appear before the panel as petitioners or witnesses to shed light on events, especially at Lekki Toll Gate. Reports submitted encompassed thorough investigations of overwhelming petitions and evidence by victims, which were also broadcast live on television stations (Mbamalu & Adamolekun, 2020).

Lagos was a forerunner in ensuring justice for victims of documented police brutality and advocating for police reforms. Two reports were submitted on police brutality and the Lekki Toll Gate shooting on 20th October 2020. At the end of the inquiry, Lagos State released a white paper detailing the outcome. There were “fundamental inconsistencies” in the report, especially concerning the number of people who died at Lekki Toll Gate. This was rejected due to a lack of evidence, which contradicts the nine fatalities listed by the panel. Notwithstanding, Lagos State Government accepted eleven (11) out of the 32 recommendations of the panel, agreed on six (6), struck one out (1), and forwarded fourteen (14) recommendations that fell outside its jurisdiction to the Federal Government for further action. In line with the recommendations of the panel and as part of addressing cruelty and police ruthlessness, Lagos State compensated the casualties with over four hundred and twenty million Naira (N420,000,000) (Lagos State Report of Lekki Incident Investigation on 20th October 2020).

CONCLUSION

Protest culture has evolved and will keep doing so. The new media is an innovation in communication technology that has come home to roost. The #EndSARS protest also marked the beginning of a new phenomenon in online civic activism. Youths are now more than ever conscious of their civil rights to exercise and speak against dysfunctional governance, misconduct, injustice, and systemic reforms. This is not to say that new media had not been previously engaged in civil protests, but #EndSARS resonates as the revolutionary point when new media wields much impact on citizens’ activism and governance. After #EndSARS, the widespread use of new media has increased as a powerful tool for advocacy and effecting change. Information travels without restriction across borders, and issues of governance are treated publicly outside the domains of the government, which, in some cases, are embarrassing. New media creates a globally recognised awareness based on the opinions of citizens expressed through social media platforms as civil activism. Citizens are more aware of their rights and freedom of expression, which may cause havoc if not well managed. The outcome of #EndSARS left a bitter pill in

the mouth of those in authority, and it is an experience they wish never to recur in Nigeria.

While this online civic agitation may not be said to be a huge success, it cannot be said to be a colossal failure. There have been decisive actions by the government in response to some of the agitations of #EndSARS, such as the disbandment of SARS, the release of detained protesters, compensation for families of victims of police brutality, the investigation and prosecution of police misconduct, and police reform. #EndSARS protest as civic activism has prompted the government to become responsive and accountable to its citizens. The Police force is constantly under public scrutiny, as any act of misconduct by the Police is projected on new media platforms by making it go viral. The Police force has greatly improved its response rate and swiftness to address issues related to abuse of power, corrupt practices, or brutality. Other civil protests have been carried out on new media post #EndSARS, but so far, none has been as outstanding as this movement, especially with the impact created.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has been able to identify areas where the Government needs to be proactive in issues concerning youths and well-being, as the most active and vibrant group of citizens. First, Youths should be actively involved in governance, engaged constructively, and given a sense of belonging as major stakeholders in their country. They wield more power in the new media as the “digital age generation” and can use it at will to have a positive or negative. This is a season where transparency and accountability are required more than ever. Second, the Government should have a measure of control to restrain the spread of false information or fake news, not by clamping down on citizens’ human rights on new media but by applying restraints in the form of checks and balances to avert widespread misleading information that could lead to upheaval. The clampdown on Twitter, a social media platform, by the then Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed, made a mockery of the prohibition, which further suggests oppression and abuse of freedom of expression, and had little or no impact on #EndSARS users who found ways around the prohibition and continued to operate their accounts. This makes it imperative for the Government to constantly carry out reforms through policies and programmes for parastatals to suit modern-day practices. Third, youths should look inwards for more creative ways to employ the new media constructively for protests and agitations without being held liable for misinformation, swaying the majority to contrary and unexpected actions that could lead to chaos and endanger the lives of many who believe in their cause.

They must always cross-check the authenticity and credibility of sources of news items before making posts or making them go viral. Fourth, youths must develop a consciousness of using new media for citizenship responsibilities and patriotism to build a better nation instead of destroying or mutilating it.

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