

THE SILENCED OTHERS: A CASE STUDY OF ENDSARS PROTESTS AND THE LEKKI TOLLGATE INCIDENT IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The #EndSARS protests and the Lekki toll gate incident gained a monumental status during and after their occurrence in Nigeria. It has attracted many responses concerning how it was successfully managed and the gains that came afterward. Previous studies have given useful information about the nature of the protests. This study is about the disparity between the active users on social media and the news posts about the protests. It has identified a significant gap between the two media. Moreover, after the disbandment of the SARS unit, judicial inquiries were constituted nationwide to meet the demand for justice by the protesters, but not all cases were heard, and some states did not constitute any such panels. This study adopts the Public Sphere theory and the Spiral of Silence theory as theoretical foundations. The findings of this study reveal that not all grievances were given a hearing during the process of the inquiries, while some states did not even constitute any panels. Thus, two factors worked against the total success of the #EndSARS movement: the number of citizens without internet access and the number of citizens denied access to legal processes.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, News Posts, #EndSARS, and Nigerian Legal System.

INTRODUCTION

The administration of justice in Nigeria is founded on the legal system inherited from the colonial era, which is run by the constitution. According to Malemi:

The idea of modern constitution began to emerge after the Reformation in Europe, particularly in the works of the English philosopher and scientist Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) and the French philosopher and writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), a French man, all of whom developed the theory that a constitution is a social contract, whereby, people agree among themselves to give up a portion of the absolute freedom that characterized pre-social "state of nature" in return for the security that a government can provide (12).

It basically works like a contract between the people and the government. It is a trust that is given to the government by citizens under the same political, economic, and geographic area for the purpose of protecting their interests. Nigeria became a republic in 1963. In 1999, Nigeria returned to democratic governance under President Olusegun Obasanjo's regime. Since then, amendments have been made to several portions of the 1999 Constitution.

The Nigerian justice system under the tripartite structure comprises the police, the prosecution, and the courts. It is primarily guided by the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended and relevant statutes such as the Criminal Code, Penal Code, and Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA) 2015. The usual process is

- Investigation
- Prosecution
- Trial and judgement
- Challenges: (for unsatisfactory judgement)

Since the introduction of mobile phones and social media platforms, the criminal justice system has been further empowered through social media platforms. The drudgery of prolonged cases and proceedings has been problematic for the citizens who have suffered different forms of injustice. The social media has proven to be the quickest and most effective means of procuring justice. This medium has worked across all strata of class, age, religion, or creed. It has been known to be effective in challenging people to their responsibilities as leaders. Conversely, social media has also been used to promote a deep impression of the leaders and their activities. Indeed, it can work for or against an idea.

In recent times, the social media has been used to spread awareness and gather evidence for court cases. Criminal investigations include evidence such as videos, tweets, Facebook posts, WhatsApp messages, etc. In Nigeria, the social media is used to put pressure on law enforcement agencies to act quickly. It mobilises public opinion and draws international attention. Crowdfunding is also an aspect of social media campaigns that is successful in pulling in financial support for victims of crime.

The #EndSARS movement swept across Nigeria in 2017 when many people, especially the youth, began to cry out against the security personnel for their atrocities, which were mostly extrajudicial in nature. They were accused of being trigger-happy and aggressive towards ordinary citizens. Naturally, speaking publicly against an aggressive security unit is not for the faint-hearted. Nevertheless, somebody started the conversation on Twitter, which served as the trigger for the movement.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To determine the rate of reportage of the #EndSARS protests on social media platforms versus local news posts.
2. To determine how successful the pressure of the social media advocacy was in the legal processes that followed.
3. To identify how the population of citizens who lacked access to social media platforms and legal access constitutes a silent group in the #EndSARS movement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A study by Maradun Lawal et al (2021) employed the Public Sphere theory and Technological Determination theory for a mixed-method analysis of the #EndSARS protests. Data was drawn from the five states most affected by the

protests. The study revealed that many protesters fell within the age range of 25-35 years, and they were mostly male. It also identified the cause of the protests as being triggered by unfavourable government policies.

Eke Chigozi and Opeyemi (2023) adopted the Agender setting theory and social responsibility theory to study the coverage of police brutality and #EndSARS reportage by Vanguard and Guardian newspapers. The population of the study consisted of 246 editions of the newspapers published between 1st October 2020 and 30th January 2021. The findings revealed that Vanguard carried the greatest number of stories about police brutality. The study concluded that both newspapers gave low prominence to the reportage but projected the protests in a positive light.

Shokoya Olakunle's (2025) study adopted a descriptive survey of the role of the social media during the #EndSARS protests. A total of 16 interviews were conducted across the three senatorial districts in Lagos, with 359 questionnaires administered. The findings revealed that the social media was instrumental to the #EndSARS protests, showing hashtags as a digital means of protesting. The development of the social media in Nigeria was revealed as a catalyst for social protests.

The study by Innobembe et al (2024) observed the use of the social media for the purpose of communication in the mobilization and management of the 2020 #EndSARS protests across Nigeria. They adopted the medium theory for their study, which focused on the challenges of the management of information by communicators saddled with the responsibility of managing the protests. It revealed that faceless protests such as the #EndSARS require a sustained communication process.

Chiakaan Jacob et al appraised the role of citizen journalism in democracy and good governance with a focus on the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. The study adopted the democratic participant media theory. A quantitative approach through a questionnaire was administered to 150 respondents. Findings revealed that citizen journalism played a major role in the success of the movement. The study recommended the encouragement and training of more citizen journalists.

Chukwudebelu and Osigwe's study conducted interviews with church leaders, activists, and protest participants to observe the engagement of the church during the #EndSARS protests. Their findings revealed that the church actively engaged in providing spiritual and material support to protesters, advocating for change, and facilitating the mediation efforts. Nkemdirim Adedina's study is focused on the advent of the new media and protest culture among citizens, especially the youth. It investigated the role of the new media during the protests and examined how digital technology has become central to civil agitations among Nigerian youths. The study reaffirms the role of social platforms in connecting, transforming, and revolutionising protest agitation for the present and future of Nigeria.

Ogwuda Ebele's paper examined the response by the government against the #EndSARS protesters as a violation of their right to protest. The paper ascertained the extent of this right and the government's responsibility towards the protection of this right. It concluded that it was a failure by the government to ensure the security and welfare of citizens as provided by the 1999 constitution. The paper recommended that

the government adopt proactive measures to ensure effective policing of protests through non-violent means.

The foregoing has shown that most researchers were concerned about the problems, causes, methods, reportage, and success of the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. They are major contributions to the discussion about the protests, which is in the consideration of how successful the #EndSARS protests were as a tool of civil agitation against oppressive structures. The knowledge gap that the researcher will address is the oversight of the “others” whose voices were muted because of the social conditions that did not permit them to be heard during the advocacy.

This paper shows the activities on social media platforms versus news posts in the Vanguard newspaper. The study will examine the following cases: #EndSARS protests and the Lekki Toll Gate incident.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-source data collection approach combining online news media and social media content to examine public discourse surrounding major sociopolitical events in Nigeria. The choice of data sources and collection methods was guided by accessibility, reliability, and feasibility constraints commonly encountered in large-scale social media research.

Online news articles were collected primarily from Vanguard, a major Nigerian news outlet with an extensive and consistently structured archive. Many alternative news websites were initially considered; however, these platforms implemented aggressive bot-detection mechanisms, JavaScript-based access restrictions, or frequently changing page structures that significantly impeded systematic data collection. Vanguard’s archival pages were comparatively stable and accessible, allowing for consistent retrieval of articles across the study period. This ensured temporal completeness and reduced the likelihood of missing relevant coverage due to technical scraping failures. Articles were filtered by publication date and by topical relevance using keyword-based matching, and only content published within the defined study window was retained for analysis.

Social media data were obtained from historical Reddit archives, which provide bulk access to public posts and comments. Reddit was selected because obtaining large-scale historical data from other major social media platforms, particularly Twitter and Facebook, has become increasingly restrictive due to high subscription costs, limited access tiers, and complex or outdated documentation. These constraints make comprehensive academic research difficult, especially for projects without significant financial resources. The Reddit archive enabled offline processing of posts, eliminating rate-limit restrictions and allowing for complete coverage of the target period.

Given the large size of the Reddit archive files, data processing was conducted using a streaming approach that reads records sequentially rather than loading entire datasets into memory. This method ensured computational efficiency and prevented system limitations from affecting data completeness. Posts were filtered using keyword matching to identify content relevant to the research topic, and timestamps

were used to restrict results to the specified date range. Only public content was analysed, and no personally identifiable information was extracted or reported.

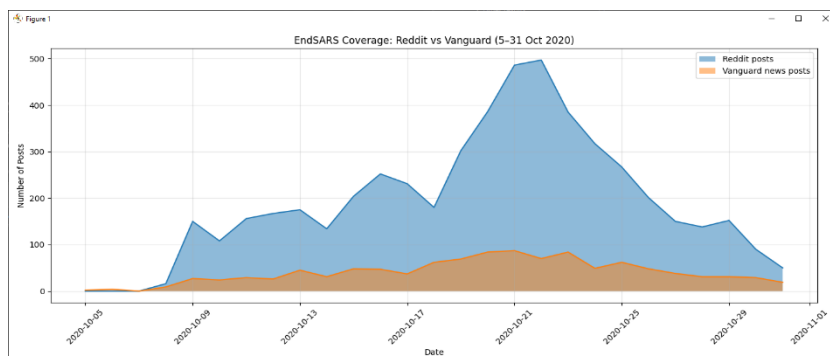
Following the collection, data from both news and social media sources were aggregated by date to enable temporal comparison. Counts of daily news articles and social media posts were computed and merged into a unified dataset. Visualization techniques were then applied to compare trends in traditional media coverage and social media activity over time. This comparative approach allowed for an examination of how public attention evolved across platforms during key moments within the study period.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process. Data collection was limited to publicly available content, and results were analysed and presented in aggregate form to avoid identifying individual users. Additionally, data collection was conducted at conservative request rates to minimize server load and comply with responsible research practices. While the use of a single news source introduces potential selection bias, this limitation is acknowledged and justified by the technical barriers posed by alternative platforms. Overall, this methodology balances technical feasibility with analytical rigour, providing a reproducible framework for studying digital discourse in environments where direct access to commercial social media (APIs) is constrained.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The SARS unit stands for Special Anti-Robbery Squad, established in 1992 to forestall the menace of armed robbery and crime that prevailed at the time. The Squad soon became notorious for bullying young men and women for frivolous reasons. The #EndSARS movement went viral on Twitter and soon reached other social media platforms and the conventional news outlets. It was successful in highlighting the grievances of many people who had experienced the brutality of the SARS unit.

The figure below shows that there was a huge gap between what was reported in local news and what was reported on social media. This coverage gap is the springboard with which the #EndSARS movement soared to draw the attention of the entire world to the predicament of the victims. Below is the graphical representation of the coverage of the #EndSARS movement, showing the significant difference in the coverage on Reddit posts as compared to news posts.



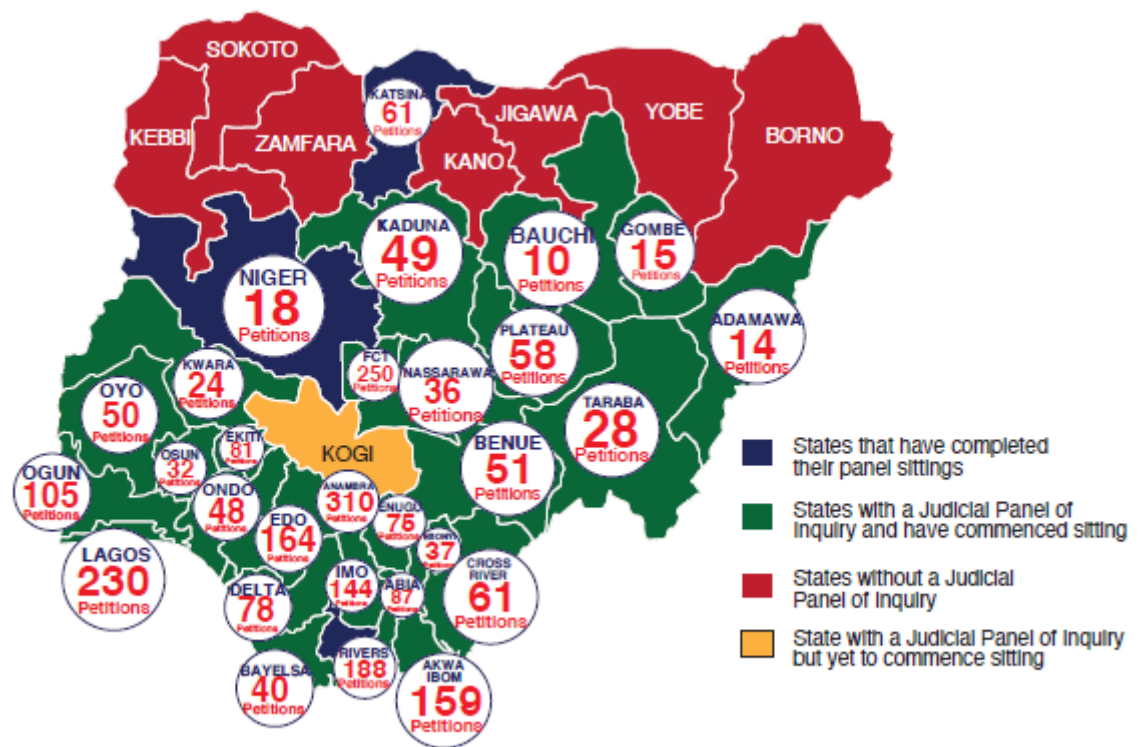
Source: Wandama Wadinga

This difference can be traced to the fact that most of the victims of the brutality and injustice were young people who are active users of the social media. Because the difference was so sharp, the movement depended on the organization and mobilization using the internet. The evidence below shows an initial equilibrium between the reports about #EndSARS movement in both the online and news posts until the gap became wider by October 9th-17th 2020. The online hike continued to be sustained until it spiked sharply after the 21 of October 2020; right after the report about the Lekki tollgate shooting on the 20th of October 2020, when peaceful protesters gathered under the auspices of the #EndSARS movement, to protest and were shot at by soldiers.

Actual lawsuits against SARS are not publicly available, but Judicial Panel Petitions have credible counts; they range mostly from October to December 2020. According to *ThisDay*, the Lagos state Judicial Panel of Inquiry on police brutality and human rights abuses by the police and SARS started its sittings in October 2020. When it concluded, it awarded N128.2m as compensation to 24 petitioners. This was reported on October 18, 2021. "Justice Doris Okuwobi explained that the panel received a total of 255 petitions from members of the public. Noting that 52 of these cases were not treated," it was reported that the 52 untreated cases would be included in the panel reports for necessary advice and actions to be taken by the Lagos State Government through the Ministry of Justice.

The Punch reported that 13 Nigerian state governments received 585 petitions against the SARS operatives. They included Anambra, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Oyo, Cross River, Abia, Plateau, Ondo, Osun, Bayelsa, Katsina, Ebonyi, and Gombe. These panels were set up as part of the demands by the #EndSARS protesters seeking justice. By 30th January 2021, the panels set up across Nigeria continued sittings in 24 states. *Enough is Enough Nigeria* published updates about the judicial panels across Nigeria. Below is its report.

Petitions Submitted across the Country and Conclusion of Sittings: Data from the Panels show the following number of petitions submitted across the country: FCT – 250 petitions, Anambra State – 310 petitions, Edo State – 164 petitions, Lagos State – 230 petitions, Imo State – 144 petitions, Abia State – 87 petitions, Akwa Ibom State – 159 petitions, Ekiti State – 81 petitions, Plateau State – 58 petitions, Cross River State – 61 petitions, Ogun State – 105 petitions, Oyo State – 50 petitions, Enugu State – 75 petitions, Benue State – 51 petitions, Ondo State – 48 petitions, Osun State – 32 petitions, Bayelsa State – 40 petitions, Kwara State – 24 petitions, Nasarawa State – 36 petitions, Delta State – 78 petitions, Ebonyi State – 37 petitions, Taraba State – 28 petitions, Adamawa State – 14 petitions, Gombe State – 15 petitions, Bauchi State – 10 petitions, Kaduna State – 49 petitions. Niger, Katsina, and Rivers States have concluded the Panels with 18, 61, and 188 petitions, respectively. <http://whatsapp.provider.media/item/8f3dd258-ea31-46f6-8522-9689c67b4fbf>



Source: Enough is Enough Nigeria

A comparison of the petition cases with the actual information gathered and presented on the graph shows that it is obviously not all aggrieved protesters and victims who filed formal complaints against the SARS operatives. Some states did not set up any panels at all. The Lekki tollgate shooting became a monumental incident for the #EndSARS movement. Soon, there were denials that it ever happened. But the evidence proved otherwise. Many videos flooded the internet about the incident, with the advent of IP geolocation and GPS/WIFI triangulation, the uploaded or livestreamed videos and reports are verifiable. Below are some samples of videos confirming the incident from YouTube and X:

Samples from YouTube

<https://youtu.be/K5rVpz0QgkY?si=zoHAD6-QUTauEqss>
https://youtu.be/CvmJh_I6cPw?si=u8eTt1vekZH405W9

Samples from X

NG Key #EndSARS Tweets from October 2020

<https://twitter.com/EiENigeria/status/1843962555234144607> — On this day in October 2020, the #EndSARS protest began to spread across Nigeria/global.
<https://x.com/officialABAT/status/1318329992540000258> — A prominent political figure commenting on #EndSARS protests.

<https://x.com/officialABAT/status/1320417942299955207> — Reflections on the impact and losses from #EndSARS protests.

<https://twitter.com/GuardianNigeria/status/1847999531817873459> — The Guardian Nigeria's statement on October 2020 #EndSARS protest significance.

<https://twitter.com/TheSerahIbrahim/status/1683100836849754112> — Remembrance post about the Lekki Toll Gate events during #EndSARS.

<https://twitter.com/Mbahdeyforyou/status/1980206967026282569> — "20th of October 2020 — We will never forget! #EndSARS" post.

<https://twitter.com/jidesanwoolu/status/1318881413320593408> — Lagos governor engages with protesters (October 2020).

<https://x.com/jack/status/1316897044972306440> — Jack Dorsey (Twitter CEO at the time) Tweeted #EndSARS in solidarity.

<https://mobile.twitter.com/eienigeria/status/1444552594102366208> — Earliest October 3 video/tweet that sparked outrage.

<https://twitter.com/AishaYesufu/status/1450782369116524545> — Aisha Yesufu recalls #EndSARS events.

<https://x.com/M10/status/1315239610440589312> — A tweet calling for global trending of #EndSARS.

NG Accounts and Threads with Many #EndSARS Posts

https://twitter.com/ENDSARS__1 — #ENDSARS account active around the protest peak (joined Oct 2020).

https://twitter.com/ENDSARS__1/with_replies — Same account with replies and protest threads.

<https://twitter.com/shedy83248444> — #EndSARS related account created during the movement.

<https://twitter.com/i/events/1314706015280156681> — Event timeline of Nigerian brands & voices on #EndSARS.

<https://mobile.twitter.com/i/events/1314459525169254400> — Notable voices on #EndSARS (tweets from October 2020).

<https://twitter.com/EndSARSnOW20> — #EndSARS Now account (context around the protests).

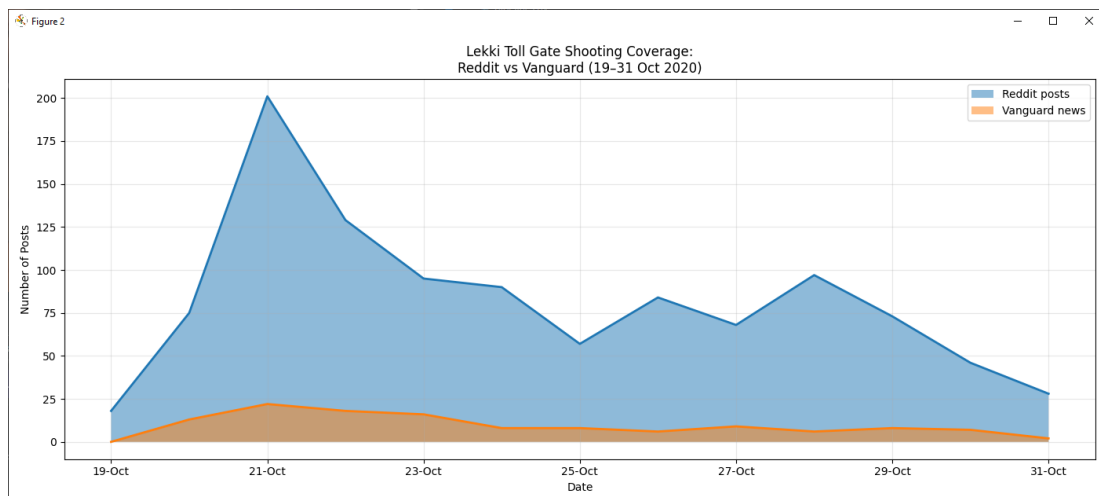
 Additional Tweet Sources (found via Reddit references)

(These are links to tweets shared around Oct 2020 in Reddit threads — many are active on Twitter/X.)

<https://twitter.com/MrSomtoOkonkwo/status/1312473176278888449> — Shared in Reddit list of early protest tweets.

https://twitter.com/_stephhani/status/1312468018811691009 — Another early outrage tweet.

<https://twitter.com/LagosReports/status/1312531882328776705> — Lagos reports SARS killing — cited in October discussions.



Source: Wandama Wadinga

The graph above clearly shows the disparity in the coverage of the Lekki toll gate incident. It was especially infamous for the allegations of truth and untruth about the actual killings of people by the Nigerian military. For many Nigerians with no access to the internet, the news could easily have gone unnoticed. Only people with access to international news outlets and social media platforms understood the gravity of the incident.

According to *Symfoni News*, the SARS unit was disbanded on the 11th of October 2020. The persistence of reports, complaints, videos, and tweets had gathered enough momentum to produce action against the group. It was spearheaded and sustained by social media users. The immediate spike that occurred between the 19th and 21st of October 2020 did not drop sharply afterwards. The online reports and audience continued to sustain interest in the incident, which could hardly be ignored. According to *The Whistler*, the then minister of information, Lai Mohammed, under the administration of the late President Muhammadu Buhari, had insisted that there were no killings at the Lekki Toll Gate where protesters had gathered. According to *Naija News*, Lai Mohammed later clarified that hoodlums had taken over the protest and soldiers had deployed blank ammunition to disperse them. But the *BBC news* gathered some testimonies that proved otherwise. Some people who had lost their loved ones wanted their identities hidden. This was because they had been threatened not to speak about it. The advent of Twitter and other social media platforms broke through this barrier of intimidation and gained the attention of foreign and local news media, thereby breaking the spiral of silence.

IMPLICATIONS

The implication of this study for theory and practice in relation to justice in the Nigerian context is that the yawning gap between access to online information and news outlets creates a space where most of the population lives in ignorance of the burning issues that affect them directly. The SARS unit operated nationwide, yet some

states did not bother to set up investigation panels for public hearings. This means that citizens who had complaints and no access to the internet or the law courts were inadvertently muted.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that the social media played a pivotal role in the success of disseminating vital information during the #EndSARS protests and the Lekki toll gate incident. Although the movement was largely successful, there remains a silent group consisting of people who had no social media access and/or access to the various judicial panels of inquiry that were constituted for the SARS inquiry. The identification of these silenced voices can become a population of interest for future advocacy campaigns. A deliberate strategy is required to allow for their inclusion in the gains of citizenship with full rights.

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