ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Use of Social Media as a Tool for Peace-Building in Nasarawa State

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Abstract

Nasarawa State has had a very interesting and important history of crisis since its creation on the 1st October, 1996. This stems from the fact that the State like Nigeria has a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-political structure. While it is truism that media play important role in peace-building, their role has always remained contentious among media scholars on whether the media escalate or de-escalate crises. Using textual analysis through library research, the paper shows that the State media outfit seems not to be living up to the expectation of performing its desired role in peace-building in Nasarawa State. The paper reveals that social media is a catalyst for peace building in Nasarawa State for building relationships, improving communication, documenting peace building efforts, sharing information in real-time, and informing and reaching a wider audience. The study confirms that *Facebook, WhatsApp* and other indigenous platforms are critical tools for peace building in Nasarawa State through Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanism Committees. The paper concludes that the use of diffusion of information and communication (ICTs) can to a great extent alter the boundary of incessant violence in Nasarawa State. The discourse is premised on public sphere theory and interrogates the use of social media as a critical tool to entrenching peace-building culture in Nasarawa State. The paper calls for an integrated approach to peace building with the establishment of neighbourhood peace-building groups which leverages the new media technologies to create neighbourhood chat groups to promote peace education and bridge the media-society-conflict gap in Nasarawa State.

Key words: Crisis, Nasarawa State, Peace-building, Social media,

Introduction

Communication is a two-way process where information flows in both ways. Communication can also be described as the utilisation of various types of media: radio, television, print and social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatApps, Myspace etc.). These forms are at various times used to engender and encourage people to participate in any human endeavour. In Nigeria, different types of media were deployed to achieve certain degree of success at different levels. For instance, the study of Chikezie and Obinna (2018) showed that the media in a broad sense in information sharing capacity still remain the only key means in curbing violent crisis situations. This is because the media is regarded as a rallying point between political leaders and the led and serve as an integral part of political life, providing the society with the messages they need to make critical decisions that affect their lives.

For Best (2013, as cited in Chikezie et al., 2018, p.521) "access to mobile phones and social media continues to expand exponentially, even in many conflict-inflicted environments in the world, attention is increasingly shifting to the trans-formational potential of new media technologies in enhancing or substituting old media in peace building. Warren (2015) confirms that "growing evidence indicates that the diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICT) can substantially alter the contours of collective violence in developing nations" cited in Chikezie et al., 2018, p.521).

According to Best (2013) as cited in Chikezie et al. (2018), peace-building is the collective processes to end or mitigate conflict, rebuild and reconcile post-conflict and foster conditions that avoid conflict in the first place. Studies in peace-making or peace-building proposed that in resolving civil conflict more is needed than merely 'negative peace', that is, absence of violence. In the words of Watson

and Hagen (2015) in Chikezie et al. (2018), the term 'crisis' is used in this study to refer to security related situations whereby citizens may be in danger, or their everyday activities are disrupted and impacted. Accordingly, crises may include natural, man-made disasters and political crises.

The Litany of Conflict in Nasarawa State

Since the return of democracy in 1999, Nasarawa State like Nigeria, being a multi- ethnic, multi-religious, multi- cultural and multi- political structure witnessed her fair share of conflict. According to Ugwu and Enna (2015) the euphoria that greeted the creation of the state, an expression of the dreams of the people for a state that would ensure harmony and fast-track their migration to a modern developing state, was soon to be drowned in orgies of violence. Few months after the creation of the state, there were bloody clashes between the Igbira and Bassa in Toto Local Government over chiefdoms and chieftaincy matters. Months later, there was another bloody and violent conflict between the Tiv and some ethnic groups in Awe, Keana, and Obi Local Governments of the state. This led to the gruesome beheading of the Sarkin Azara, Alh. Musa Ibrahim on the 12th of June, 2001. Thereafter, the first civilian Governor of the state, Abdullahi Adamu, had this to say:

> Our state has been convulsed in an orgy of inter-ethnic violence. Friends and neighbours have suddenly become enemies. Men, women and children have been slaughtered in cold blood. People were not just killed; they were butchered. Movable and immovable properties of our own brothers and sisters have been destroyed or looted. Hundreds of people have been turned into hapless and hopeless displaced people in their traditional homes. This crude and senseless violence has neither rhyme nor reason. This explosion of bottled fury and frustration threatens to set us back and retard our progress in the development of the state (pp. 65-66).

As statesmanly and grave as the above speech is, no government has systematically delved into the underlined core issue in a systematic and sustained way to reverse the conflict; hence, Ugwu and Enna (2015, p.66) submit thus:

> Ten years on, the conflict has only grown deadlier, bloodier and threatens the existence of the state itself. Attacks and counter-attacks between the Tiv and Fulani in particular, remain regular and bloody in the state, leading to mass killings and destruction. Many villages have been ransacked and totally obliterated leading to the internal displacement of persons. Communities have had to relocate after camping in schools and churches following the aftermath of attacks and invasions. Farm produce and cattle have been rustled, destroyed and or, torched.

As a result of the foregoing, women, children and vulnerable groups have been exposed to epidemic, hunger and famine leading to deaths that have geometrically increased the yoke of child labour and prostitution. It goes without saying that sexual harassment and violence were perpetrated during these conflicts. In 2013, there was a violent clash that claimed many lives and properties. The Judicial Commission of Inquiry puts the number of people killed at 667, while properties worth over ₦2.3bn were destroyed.

Nasarawa State became a notorious global conflict spot, when news broke that about 74 officers and men of the Nigerian Police, as well as other security agents were killed by Ombatse cult members during an operation in Alakyo village. This condemnable tragedy was, however, only the climax of unreported killings, invasions, murders, arsons and intense bloody ethnic conflicts between and involving the Eggon, Alago, Tiv, Mighili, Mada, Gwandara, Bassa and Fulani. A major factor responsible for conflict in Nasarawa State is the relationship between farmers and the Fulani herdsmen who migrated largely these days as a result of climate change (Ugwu & Enna, 2015, p.67-68).

Statement of the Problem

Drawing from the study of Chikezie et al. (2019), in 2002, a Nigerian journalist Isioma Daniel sparked off a religious riot that could have led to a full-blown war, with a newspaper report in which Prophet Mohammed was allegedly denigrated and as a result over 200 people were killed, over 1,000 persons wounded, and more than a score displaced in the period when the nation was battling with Boko Haram insurgency and Biafrans agitations. This in effect clearly illustrates the power of the pen and the effectiveness of news reports which can either spark off a crisis or engender peace. In Nasarawa State, the public media organisations, *Nasarawa Broadcasting Service (NBS)* and now moribund *Nigerian Newsday* through their messages packaged in the form of news, opinions, commentary, opinion polls, programmes, developing stories, consistent in-depth reportage of news matters, commercials and so on failed to set the agenda for peaceful coexistence. The many crisis ravaging situations in Nasarawa State prompted Okoli and Atelhe (2014) as cited in Ugwu and Enna (2015, p.68) to say that "the conflicts and their unfolding dynamics of degeneration lamented that the conflict has reached a critical threshold whereby the prospect of resolution largely appears precarious. This is because the current stage of the conflict is characterised by pathological hate and vindictive vendetta". Ugwu and Enna (2001, p.68) corroborated the submission of Okoli and Atelhe (2014) and concluded that "the above picture has further exacerbated the economic hardship of the largely agrarian Nasarawa State population as agricultural activities have been in the decline due to fear of attacks. The political quest for which ethnic groups have political dominance have remained undiluted as the political atmosphere is always tensed when any decision is to be taken in the state".

To curb circle of violence in the State, the former Governor, Umaru Tanko- Almakura confirmed in his farewell speech that the State government have evolved a strategy that has continued to yield positive result in addressing insecurity in State. According to Almakura (2019), the deliberate initiative of *Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanisms* has brought warring communities together to discuss and resolve their differences with partial supervision from government. He further confirms that the strategy has been very effective and successful with sustenance of peace and harmonious co-existence amongst communities in the State. To further consolidate on the gains of the new initiative, the State government inaugurated *Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanisms* at the State, Local government, Development Areas, Districts and Village levels to serve as arbitrators and conciliators in the respective communities.

It is in the light above that scholars accuse the media of being compromised by its neoliberal tendencies punctuated by profit-making, advertising and political associations (Petley, 2004; Omenugha & Oji, 2008; Uzuegbunam & Udeze, 2013; Omenugha & Uzuegbunam, 2015 as cited in Chikezie et al., 2018). This is why it is safe to say that ethical criteria such as objectivity, balance, comprehensiveness, independence, and integrity, seem secondary to news reporters of the two State media organisations. In all these, the common axiom "he who pays the piper, calls the tune" rings true. As Sobowale (1992) observes, responsible journalism demands that while media practitioners combat and expose the ills of society, they should do so in a way that does not destroy that which they seek to build. The challenge of responsible journalism seems to have become most pressing in a new global order where the media are required to be agents and catalysts of peace and development (Chikezie et al., 2018, p.522).

In view of the above therefore, this study sets to explore the use of social media as an alternative tool for peace-building in Nasarawa State. This is because it is independent of government and corporate control or interference and highly interactive. This gives participants the opportunity to question some of their personal assumptions that may not be in conformity with rational discourse. The absence of dogmatism is ensured, and the sphere is to some extent, open, inclusive and equal. Hence, the study's objectives are to; ascertain the relevance of social media in peace building process in Nasarawa State and determine how social media

social can be used as a tool for peace building in Nasarawa State.

Methodology

The study employed descriptive method in carrying out the textual analysis via library research. In the words of Babbie (2001) as quoted by Talabi, Adaja & Adefemi (2018, p.3) "the main purpose of descriptive study is to describe situations and events. Babbie (2001) further elucidates that "the researcher observed and then described what was observed" (cited in Talabi et al, 2018, p.3). The study examined the utilisation of social media as an alternative tool for engendering peace building in Nasarawa State. This is a theoretical work that looks at the relevance of social media in peace building and how it can be deployed to bring about peaceful coexistence in Nasarawa State.

Social Media in Conflict Resolution and Peace Building

Today's mobile and social media technologies demonstrate how interactive dialogue is just as important, if not more important, in peace-building efforts. As one popular formula puts it: "as long as you are talking, you can't be shooting" (Best, 2013), as cited in Chikezie et al. (2018, p.526). Consolidating on the role of mobile and social media in peace-building, Best (2013) in Chikezie et al. (2018, p. 526-527) surmarises it this way:

> Mobile phones are becoming fundamental technologies in enabling this peace building dialogue… Somalia, often topping the global list of failed states, has five mobile phone operators…Whether accessed on mobile phones, through cybercafés or other means, social media platforms, and methods to monitor them, are also emerging as important technologies for peace building. One critical component in building and sustaining peace are political developments and democratic reforms that set the stage for broader participatory governance. Social media can support these developments up to and including elections.

Corroborating this view, Narula (2016, p.2) confirms that 'the communities that work for peace building activities in the society turn new media into a very utilitarian entity as far as spreading awareness for peace building tasks is concerned". Narula's (2016) study further elucidated that:

> the new media can be assertive in creating peace by taking conflict resolution and strategies to a social network platform, leading to peace building dialogues among members of the social setup, and coming up with theories with regard to same. Creating awareness among the youngsters regarding peace building tasks in society can lead to productive results, followed by persuading them into action.

These overwhelming attributes could be exploited for the advancement of peace in the country. Citizens no longer are constrained by the availability of traditional media because the social media alter barriers from geographic distance. The new (social) media have been credited with the power to provide a platform which is accessible to a greater spectrum of citizens due largely to a reduction in geographical distance and the economic and physical costs of political participation (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2013). This power of space could be utilised to carry and spread developmental messages across various local and segmented contexts in Nasarawa State.

Similarly, Sohrabi-Haghighat (2010) in Chikezie et al. (2018) agreed on the ability of social media to reach transnational audiences and to circumvent traditional top-down political hierarchies that have increased the capacity of dissidents to frame their movements and mobilise citizens in local and Diaspora domains. Chiluwa and Adegoke (2013) examined the reactions of people who tweeted and commented on some crisis events in Nigeria, including tweets by self-acclaimed Boko Haram sect members who tweeted on the Boko Haram Twitter page. Their findings showed how people can reveal their attitudes about significant events by expressing themselves through the alternative and inclusive platform offered by

social media. While some individuals and groups express their feelings as victims who have been attacked, other tweeters and commenters expressed their views on how the uprisings may be put down. These findings demonstrated how an opportunity for people to vent their frustrations online could delay or stall exacerbation of war and conflict.

Challenges of Social Media and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria

Like many things, this new romance with technology can be abused and indeed appears to be as intoxicating as new wine. Restraint and decorum are vanishing quickly from online spaces. In a brazen new media order, liberty and expressive culture are now confused with license and capacity to insult and disparage. People could easily also confuse the propensity to defame and slander for courage as exemplified in a not so- recent social media incident in Nigeria where a top official of the National Security and Civil Defense Corps (NSCDC) was relieved of his duty as a consequence of an interview clip released online by Channels TV and which attracted much ridicule, demonisation, and abuse from social media users (Chikezie et al., 2018).

For Olabamiji (2014), the expression of ethnic and religious sentiments in the new (social) media has led to some inter-ethnic, inter-religious disputes and crisis in the northern part of the country. For instance, the Boko Haram insurgents have been able to use the social media to post gory pictures and videos of threat, murder, bombings and other activities of the sect. When the social media are used in this way it creates a state of violence and the intent of revenge which inadvertently turns the country into a state of anarchy. Koller (2005) in Chikezie et al. (2018) equally posited that the new (social) media can trigger, escalate and intensify conflict and unwittingly cause political violence.

In the same vein, Igwe Emmanuel Onyeneke, the traditional ruler of Ekwulobia community in the Aguata Local Government Area of Anambra State blamed the lingering crisis in his kingdom on the social media as it is used to propagate hate and bigotry, thereby prolonging the communal feud (Epressive Information, 2019).

Theoretical Underpinning

Public debate takes place mostly through the mass media, but also at meetings or through social media, academic publications and government policy documents. This new public sphere spanned the public and the private realms, and through the vehicle of public opinion it put the State in touch with the needs of the society. Taken this into consideration, this study employed the public sphere theory. Created in the century, the public sphere is a discursive space where people could interchange their opinions so as to create a common, mutual judgment (Hauser, 1988, cited in Chikezie et al., 2018). In his seminal work, The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere, German sociologist and critical theorist, Jurgen Habermas viewed public sphere as various avenues where citizens can freely express, participate, communicate and share their understanding, ideas and information that involve political, social issues and other diverse things that affect their social coexistence; peace and conflicts inclusive.

Ideally, these platforms comprise but are not limited to, clubs, coffee joints and saloon joints, assemblies and hangouts. In Nigeria, motor parks, viewing centres, tea joints, and market places could be instances of possible public spheres. Kperogi (2011, p.60), referred to such platforms as "open, inclusive, dialogic arena of rational-critical discourse untrammeled by either the state or the private sector and that acts as a check on state power." Nevertheless, with the advancement in information and communication technology, the character of Habermas' public sphere theory has been advanced and transformed from an easily physical, locational stage to a more sophisticated, cyber-based but complicated communication space.

This is a space where concerned members of the social organisation gather (not physically) to exchange opinions regarding public affairs and deliberate sometimes in a critical and analytical manner (Ubayasiri, 2007; Allan, 2010; Abubakar, 2012, cited in Chikezie et al., 2018). In other words, technology has created an alternative media for the

expansion of public sphere. In a similar manner, Neal (2012) wrote that the critical nature of the public sphere is endangered by the power of the traditional, mainstream mass media that transform most of the society into a passive public, the objectives of a consumer culture.

It is interesting to note, however, that the possibility of reaching larger numbers of persons allow internet users to create ties that would have been difficult to maintain, and these ties create 'networks'. Castells (2004) recognises the importance of networks, affirming that power does not reside in institutions, but is rather located in the networks that structure society. To have control, networks need to be created that counteract other networks, making it a question of "networks vs. networks". It, therefore, suffices to note that for the new social media to thrive in Nigeria, the old networks characterised by the mainstream media, have to be challenged.

In making a case for the use of the social media as a tool for engendering peace building in Nasarawa State, two principles of the public sphere should be critically considered. Firstly, it is independent of government and corporate control or interference. It is a platform that is free and devoid of restrictions that hinder freedom of expression. Secondly, the discourse in the public sphere could be amiable, critical and rational. Thus, participants in this platform avoid sentimental and coloured responses to issues as may be seen in the mainstream media because of its many gatekeepers and ownership policies. This gives participants the opportunity to question some of their personal assumptions that may not be in conformity with rational discourse. The absence of dogmatism is ensured, and the sphere is to some extent, open, inclusive and equal.

Social Media for Peace building in Nasarawa State

Social media involves the use of various technological tools and methods for sharing and discussing information. Social media is a way to transmit or distribute information to a broad audience where users have an opportunity to create and distribute content. Social media platforms allow users to share ideas and user generated content (including images and videos) while building connections and associations, both personal and professional. Social media has become a powerful tool for ordinary people who want to stand up to injustice, take on political leaders and demand change. This means that leaders, particularly those of with an authoritarian bent, view it as a threat. For instance, Dwyer and Molony (2019) revealed that in mid-July, Chad lifted its 16-month social media ban. This ended the longest social media blockage ever seen in any African country. The government argued that the lengthy ban was necessary for security reasons. The Chadian case highlighted the way social media has increasingly been framed as a threat, especially by authoritarian leaders. Since the beginning of 2019 at least nine other African countries have also experienced government ordered internet shutdowns. This is because political leaders often view social media as a threat because it can provide the public with greater access to information. It also has the potential to mobilise and challenge leadership. It is on this basis that Lachapelle (2011) opines that there are three fundamental uses of social media platforms: (1) As a means of personal communication, (2) To link groups, and (3) To promote an idea.

The above submission gives credence to the relevance of social media as a tool for peace building in Nasarawa State. This is because social media is important as a peace building tool in Nasarawa State in terms of building relationships, improving communication, documenting peace building efforts, sharing information in real-time, and informing and reaching a wider audience than was possible at any time in history. This explains why Niven (2011) reveals that social networks are beginning to have a bigger role in building community and catalysing neighbourhood co-operation and social action. The recent post-riot clean-up *Twitter* campaign in London was one of the examples of how social media can be used to inspire people to get involved in community life. Social media platforms like *Facebook. WhatsApp, Twitter*, and other indigenous ones: *Nairaland, allAfrica,*

Niaja.com, OnlineNigeria, Ynaija, etc. have succeeded in opening up the Nigeria social space in new ways. This is to the effect that they are now the new equalisers that are breaking the information production, dissemination, and consumption monopoly that was hitherto the mainstay of government and privately-owned mass media. It is now unleashing the concept of citizen journalism and burgeoning of bloggers, social commentators, digital activists, and social critics. The social activists now use these platforms to create awareness, mobilise, network, share ideas, critique, vent frustrations and ultimately discursively set agenda for conflict resolution and peace in Nigeria. The voiceless could now have a voice, as the possible voices can now set up multiple social media accounts among the social groups.

In Nasarawa State, greater percentage of citizens, especially the youths have social media platforms like *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* either on personal basis or as a group. These provide the ready tools to launch the peace building efforts through the State *Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanism* in which committees have already been set up at the State, Local Government, Development Areas, Districts and Village levels. These levels of interventions can create social media platforms like *Facebook* and *WhatsApp* including the indigenous platforms to interact and exchange ideas. This strategy was used by *Keep Britain Tidy* in which Niven (2011) posits that the organisation used existing social media networks of *Twitter* and *Facebook* to help change people's habits nationally and organised local litter pick-ups. She further opines that *Keep Britain Tidy* had almost 9000 followers on *Twitter* and 2000 on *Facebook* and the organisation has encouraged its *Twitter* followers to take photos of litter in their areas and share them as Tritpic as the organisation also launched a closed Ning forum where people can turn conversation and debate into action. It is also pertinent to state that the *Keep Britain Tidy* strategy can be replicated in Nasarawa State where the village committees can be encouraged to set-up of neighbourhood committees and such committees can create their social media platforms to interact and exchange peace building messages at that level and in the language the inhabitants can understand. These platforms can also be used to share both audios and videos to take care of both literate and illiterate ones in the community. In the same vein, the locals can be encouraged to join the platforms and share information on any breach of peace. These platforms which are at various committee's levels can be linked together at the state level to ensure that quick decisions are taken to avoid any potential breach of peace. This is because Olabamiji's (2014) study confirmed that Facebook is now available in over 70 languages including English and Nigeria's local Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo and that hash tags on Twitter are used to raise public awareness about a phenomenon, promote social events, share events and join trending topics and conversations in Twitter sphere.

Today's social media technologies have demonstrated how interactive dialogue can be just as important if not more important in peace-building efforts in Nasarawa State. This is because as Best (2013), puts it "*as long as you are talking, you can't be shooting*". This makes the role of social media as a catalyst for peace building project in Nasarawa State critical as one unique component in building and sustaining peace are political developments and democratic reforms that set the agenda for broader participatory governance in which social media can underpin these developments in all human endeavours in the state.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn attention to the challenges as well as the strengths of the social media in dealing with the issue of peace-building and conflict resolution in Nigeria. Hence, the study has made a case that with all its potential and strengths, social media can play a catalytic role in Nasarawa State with regard to engendering and stimulating peace-building, and to seal the discrepancies occasioned by differences within the State through the instrumentality of the State Community-Based Conflict Resolution Mechanism.

Conclusively, a people oriented, responsible and peaceful social media interaction must be advocated

and enshrined in people's sub-consciousness before the desired result can be achieved. Consequently, peace education using social media tools is critical. Social media platforms could play a role in improving the effectiveness of peace education. Policy makers at all levels in Nasarawa State need to consider giving peace education adequate attention and to embark on peace advocacy projects through social media platforms to serve as peace building measures. The peace education project must include the creation of awareness and the State broadcast outfit, Nasarawa State Broadcasting Service, would come in and also create a level of consciousness on the indisputable powers of the social media and how user-generated content might go a long way to either ignite war or build peace.

In view of the above therefore, there is a pressing need for the social media audiences to have some level of literacy such as social media literacy and digital literacy skills and competencies that are essential for living and working in media- and information-rich societies. Unless this is done, the many potential integral to the social media, including those required for peace-building and conflict resolution, may remain largely untapped. This is because social media platforms of *Facebook, WhatApp* and other indigenous ones are critical tools in peace building project in Nasarawa State. Social media transcend ethnic, religion and political divisions through its discursive attribute for better understanding of their differences.

Therefore, the paper concludes that the use of diffusion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) can to a great extent alter the boundary of incessant violence in Nasarawa State. This is because Nasarawa State being a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-political structure needs sustainable social media platforms at the grassroots that can engender interaction and exchange of peace building messages among the people. As James Madison puts it (quoted in ACCE conference theme statement, 2019) "a popular government, without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or, perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance". Therefore, this paper calls for an integrated approach to peace building in the State where warring communities are brought together through the establishment of neighbourhood peace-building groups in which they will leverage on the new media technologies to create neighbourhood chat groups to promote peace education to bridge the media-society-conflict gap in Nasarawa State.

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