

Chapter 15

Social Media Activism: Championing and Reconstructing Causes and Values – Mapping the Social Media Ecology of “EndSARS” Protest of 2020 in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on social media activism and the factors that trigger activism in developing countries. It philosophically reexamines the aftermath of the EndSARS protest via the lens of social media ecology. The epistemological and ontological underpinnings of EndSARS media ecology anchor on social media affordances. It evaluates social movements such as #EndSARS to identify their impact on addressing ills that have retarded development in Africa, particularly the Nigerian state. The chapter combines extant literature with empirical data to discuss socio-politico-environmental realities and issues contributing to social and political disorder in Nigeria. It also proposes solutions on how people can utilize lessons learned from the ‘EndSARS’ debacle to advance cause-oriented activities and value reorientation. Finally, the chapter suggests a paradigm shift from a violent mass movement to a peaceful one, using the public relations perspective of crisis management. The chapter focuses on social media activism and the factors that trigger activism in developing countries. The EndSARS protest and its aftermath were philosophically reexamined via the lens of social media ecology. The epistemological and ontological underpinnings of EndSARS media ecology were traced to social media affordances. The chapter also evaluates social movements such as #EndSARS for the purpose of identifying its impact in addressing ills that have retarded growth and development in Africa, particularly the Nigerian state. The chapter combines extant literature positions with empirical data to discuss socio-politico-environmental realities and issues contributing to the growing phenomenon of social and political disorder in Nigeria. The chapter also proposes solutions on how to utilize lessons learned from the ‘EndSARS’ debacle to advance cause-oriented activities and value reorientation. Finally, the chapter proposes a paradigm shift from a violent mass movement to a peaceful one, using public relations perspective of crisis management.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media offers lots of benefits to like-minded individuals to champion cause-oriented activities that herald social or political change. The epistemological and the ontological interpretations of social media activism, within the frame of media ecology, need to be explored further as a way of engendering and contextualizing positive social and political change in Africa's political landscape. Ruotsalainen and Heinonen (2015) argue that "the media ecology tradition perceives media as a structure in which society and culture evolve—as an environment where people act and live their lives, and through which reality is perceived" (p.3). Media ecology has been studied through different lenses and perspectives (Strate, 2004; Polski, 2013; Polski and Gorman, 2012). Of significance in these lenses and approaches utilized in conceptualizing or contextualizing media ecology, is the emphasis on media as environment, the disruption in the environment, and advances in(media) technologies (Ruotsalainen & Heinonen, 2015; Arriagada and Ibáñez 2020). These factors have expanded the frontiers of media ecology in communication studies and perhaps opened a new vista to exploring the concept within the milieu of new media, particularly social media, which has advanced the phenomenon of ecosystemic society.

Social media have opened a new vista of understanding activism, which is a departure from the mainstream media. This new vista is embedded in the social media affordances (Bucher and Helmond, 2018) characterized by: multi-access to information, self-expressions on contentious issues, open participation in socio-political and economic discourses, users' choice of determining what is or not news, framing of issues, and users' ability to engage the political leadership and stakeholders online. The wind of social media activism which has swept across many countries in Europe, America, and Africa is still raging and portends great lessons for conflict resolution and proactive public relations practice. It is believed that some of the issues that trigger protests are akin to factors that retard development in developing countries, including Nigeria.

In October 2020, Nigeria was engulfed in intense civil protests in which Nigerians demanded the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) over allegations of extra-judicial killings, torture, extortion, and other crimes committed by its members. Before the protest, social media was awash with gory stories of these allegations; this eventually led to the "#EndSARS" campaign across cities. The protest got to a climax on October 20, 2020, when the Army attacked the protesters at Lekki Tollgate in Lagos State, allegedly killing and injuring some protesters. The EndSARS social media activism and its aftermath call for a philosophical reexamination using the lens of social media ecology. Hence, this chapter focuses on identifying the perceptions of social media ecologists and influencers on the incidence and marries their views with epistemological and ontological underpinnings of media ecology, within the African setting.

The chapter also aims at evaluating social movement (e.g. #EndSARS) and identifies its impact on addressing ills that have retarded growth and development in Africa, particularly the Nigerian state. The chapter also proposes solutions on how to utilize lessons learned from the 'EndSARS debacle to advance cause-oriented activities and value reorientation. Again, the chapter proposes a paradigm shift from a violent mass movement to a peaceful one and adopts a working definition of activism anchored on public relations perspective. The Chapter acknowledges the paradox of mass movement in correcting the ills of a society; and combines extant literature positions with empirical (qualitative) data in discussing socio-politico-environmental realities and issues contributing to the growing phenomenon of social and political disorder in Africa, particularly Nigeria.

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