
ЗАРУБЕЖНЫЙ ОПЫТ УПРАВЛЕНИЯ

ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND PROTEST ACTIONS: THE SOCIAL MEANINGFULNESS OF THE INTERNET AS TOOL FOR POLICY CRITICISM

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Community media is created and controlled by a community of people in a geographic space or of similar identity or interest and is different from strictly commercial media, state run media, or public broadcasting. It is essentially meant to engage groups that are normally excluded or marginalized from the mainstream mass media process. Community media's role becomes particularly evident when people are confronted by circumstances that test their capacity to stick together and forge a common front in dealing with a problem. Although having different technology and structural manifestations, community media have a common denominator which, in all cases, is the intention to push an idea unto the public sphere. Regardless of the issues and politics involved, citizens using the platform of community media want to have an arena to express their ideas to others. Community media exist in various print and electronic modes, including those on digital/new media platforms. In recent times, digital media technologies have grown in a manner that has led to a more widespread and extensive use of communication devices that rely on Internet connectivity to perform many functions. Consequently, emerging on this background are many online communities that serve as platforms for voicing out grievances against unpopular policies, using platforms such as blogs, wikis, vlogs and social media sites. This paper attempts, using virtual ethnography as a method of observation, to critically assess online media communities in Nigeria and situate them within the context of the currently growing trend of voicing social and political protests through the Internet by those who either lacked access to mainstream media or chose Internet platforms due to its peculiar characteristics. It concludes that whereas the Internet has become socially useful to the emergent communities, it has not been able to give them considerable leverage in influencing policy decisions at social and political levels.

Key words: Virtual community, protest, community media, online communities, digital platform.

Introduction and Conceptual Clarifications. The definition of community appears to come with two distinct meanings: with reference either to a group of interacting people who reside in some proximity of space, time and relationship and share certain values in common with a degree of social cohesion; or to a group of interacting living organisms sharing an environment. In a cohesive relationship such as in human communities, participants' identities can be affected by commonly present conditions like intent, belief, resources, preferences, needs, risks etc.

The inception of social media networks dates back to the development of PLATO system at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the 1960s and 1970s, during which the preliminary conditions for creating networks of computers were set. Then, the individuals sitting before the computers formed the social network. Although such networks were devoid of some of the basic assumptions of what a community is such as spatial proximity, yet the early networked computers allowed experimentations that would allow people to connect with each other using the computer as the portal in becoming part of a network or networks, where they could share some common interests (Mitra, 2010).

Virtual communities today are still built on the initial common platform of being able to make people engage with one another discursively, although there has been a transformation from text-intensive discussion boards to social networks as they are known today, providing multimedia features that comprise videos and pictures. Virtual communities have experienced a transformation from being groups that share ideas on essentially text-based platforms such as discussion boards to social network groups using social media (web-based and mobile technologies that turn communication into an interactive dialogue). This transformation has been as a result of the popularization of powerful digital machines and high-speed data connections. Individuals can now create a personal digital presence using various digital tools, the most readily available of them being smart phones.

Some characteristics of social media tools are identified in the table below:

Simple characteristics of social media tools

1. **Reach** – Social media technologies are capable of providing for the user a global reach, with a more decentralized and less hierarchical structure.
2. **Accessibility** – They are usually available to the public at little or no cost.
3. **Usability** – Most social media productions do not require specialized skills and training. All that is required is the basic knowledge or ability to use a mobile device such as a smart phone.
4. **Immediacy** – Social media production and dissemination technologies provide for virtually instantaneous responses, where only the participants determine whether or not to delay response.
5. **Permanence** – Social media productions can be altered almost instantaneously by comments or editing.

S o u r c e : Wikipedia (with modifications by the author).

Mitra (2010), citing Boyd and Ellison (2007), has pointed out that while the existence of new technologies or platforms for creating online communities that allow for individual digital presence became noticeable in 2005, with the discovery by users of sites such as MySpace and Facebook, numerous social network sites appeared and disappeared between late 1990s and early 2000s. Also, such sites had different levels of functionality, different kinds of followership in terms of the kind of users they attracted, and some of them were known only in certain regions of the world (Bebo in Europe and Orkut in Brazil and later India). Digital mediated social networking had become a common and popular experience by 2009 (Mitra 2010), and personal digital presence and experience via social media continues to grow even in tri-continent countries as smart phones become more and more affordable.

Community media have also been described as community communication (Rennie, 2006). This is because they allow for community participation, in which humans in a communal relationship, whether or not they live in close proximity of space and time, share some commonalities based on intent, belief, resources, preferences, needs or risk, and can experience a kind of belonging borne out of accessibility to a platform of expression that exists among and for people of similar values and experiences. It follows from this that community media by their nature exhibit certain characteristics that may differentiate them from the mainstream media. Noteworthy is the fact that they are mostly free from commercial interests that often bedevils the operations of regular media outfits, they disseminate local news and information to affected communities in a world where media concentration hands has resulted in neglect of locally generated information, and are devoted to community participation. Virtual communities emerged as a result of an intersection of human needs and technology.

In engaging members of the community in their daily operations, community media represent the community they serve by genuinely reflecting the needs, problems, concerns and aspirations of the community. They could be either direct local level media outlet or ones that are framed around an issue that concerns the community, which could have parameters that are local, national or international or a combination of the three in terms of geographical scope. Community media serve the interests of various groups by addressing their concerns in the public sphere. Consequently, they are required in order to entrench the ideals of civil society. Lack of accessibility to the commercially driven mainstream media by the ordinary citizenry is a major case in favor of the need to have a vibrant, effective and well organized community media.

Describing Online/virtual Communities. Virtual communities emerged as a result of an intersection between human needs and technology. The online digital media over the years have been used by individuals to link up with others with whom they share common interests. Because they are relatively inexpensive and accessible, social media allow individuals to publish and access information, consequently, by publishing themselves, individuals have been able more than

ever before to identify others like themselves and form groups to address common problems. These groups are referred to as online or virtual communities, whose continuous existence is ensured by members who engage in membership rituals. The members may or may not know themselves in real life. As pointed out by Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2005), researchers now consider the strength and nature of relationships between individuals to be a more useful basis for defining community than physical proximity.

For the purpose of making the definition of community suitable for the analysis, design and evaluation of community software platforms, some researchers have defined online communities as people who 'come together for a particular *purpose*, and who are guided by *policies* (including norms and rules) and supported by *software*' (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). From this definition it is possible to conclude that groups of people, who come together online for a cause, while they continue to exist, are communities.

Also, it is obvious that the popularity of virtual communities reflects the fact that people are using Internet technologies to achieve social and economic goals (Rheingold, 1993; Wind and Mahajan, 2002, cited in Porter, 2005). People participate as members of *virtual communities of transaction* to buy, sell or learn more about products and services; there are also virtual communities where people discuss shared interests (communities of interest), develop social relations (communities of relationships) and explore new identities (communities of fantasy) (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997, cited in Porter, 2004).

Having suggested five attributes that can be used to classify online or virtual communities [these are: *Purpose (content of interaction)*, *Place (extent of technology mediation of interaction)*, *Platform (technical design of interaction e.g. whether synchronous or asynchronous)*, *Population Interaction Structure (whether a computer supported social network, a small group or network, or a virtual public)* and *Profit Model (return on interaction through creation of economic value)*], Porter (2004) goes on to propose a typology of virtual communities that is based on establishment and relationship orientation. By this typology, virtual communities by establishment can be either member or government initiated. The first gives rise to *social* or *professional* communities while the second produces *commercial*, *non-profit* or *government* at the level of relationship orientation. This functionalist typology is exceptionally useful in understanding virtual communities because it addresses the two instances in which a virtual community could emerge, i.e. founded by individuals or organizations. This point is essential in the sense that prior focus had been on communities initiated by individuals while those formed by organizations and governments had been largely neglected (Porter, 2004).

Proceeding from an anthropological perspective in highlighting the various forms in which online communities might appear Wilson and Peterson (2002) concluded that:

These online groups exhibit a wide range of characteristics and serve a variety of purposes, from small groups engaged in tightly focused discussions of specific topics, to complex created worlds with hundreds of simultaneous participants, to millions of users linked by an interest in markets or exchange networks for goods and information. These new media collectives might be mobilized to further particular political agendas or to bring together dispersed members of familial or ethnic groups, or they might be organized around commodity consumption or multinational corporate interests.

Identity in Online Community Studies. Virtual communities are formed around interests, which could range from hobbies to self-help issues, to scholarly and professional discourse. These online communities share a common interest and members are prone to visiting the same web sites which serve the special interest they share and discuss in digital interaction.

One issue that has however featured prominently in the literature on online communities is that of identity. Identity is a subject of interest to many disciplines. Investigations into peoples' conduct as online subjects have provided insight into the ways identity is constructed and reconstructed within online communities.

The cyberspace allows for new construction of identity. Incoming members of an online group or new users of online resources are often requested to provide certain personal identity information in order to be admitted. The problem has always been that there is no way to verify the true identity of the user or member. Users construct new identities for themselves by the information deliberately provided and with which a kind of narrative is created for them on the social network. The dependence of the entire system on the voluntary decision of the user to generate either a true or false identity has created a challenge in terms of determining who members of online communities truly are. In most instances there is a dichotomy between online personalities and their identities in real life. Moreover, the digital divide created by the inaccessibility of certain classes and groups to social media tools has also made membership of online communities available only to certain class or groups of people. This category of people is able to create for itself virtual identities that appear to make up for their deficiencies in real life. The possibility of concealing identity in an online community of any sort could constitute *sock puppetry* – an act of pretending to be someone other than who you are in order to further personal ends. Despite all the benefits that the internet has brought, it remains largely an uncivilized place (Giles, 2011) and abuse is often possible. Attempts to curb identity abuse problems online through legislations may soon be irrelevant since the field of information technology is fast developing tools that can identify Internet users with unprecedented precision.

Online Communities and Protests. Investigations on the use of social media by online communities to discuss issues of group concerns are one way of studying the social usefulness of the Internet. With the proliferation of mobile telecommunications services in Nigeria, subscription to mobile Internet services

has been growing in leaps and bounds. A recent Nigeria Communications Commission (NCC) report says that over 90 million subscribers are registered with over 115 million mobile phone SIM cards in Nigeria. With these numbers, which continues to grow, it is not surprising to observe that gaining access to the Internet is no longer as stressful as it used to be for those Nigerians, who by social and demographic status can afford to be connected, since most telecommunication service providers now offer access to the Internet as part of their regular service package. Increasingly, access to the Internet is through mobile phones, especially in developing countries; and the increased use of smart phones and the many purposes for which handsets are used are strong trends that are expected to continue (BBC Media Action, 2012). Also, evidence has also been provided in support of the idea that developing economies will be able to sustain the growth even with their seemingly weak technology base using the combined forces of technology, investment and new business models (Kende, 2012).

It is largely undisputed within democratic systems of government that citizens have an inalienable right to express themselves. On the right of citizens to criticize policies and actions of government and other authorities using the cyberspace without being persecuted for doing so, Rheingold (2000), posited that:

The online community has a responsibility to the freedom it enjoys, and if it wants to continue to enjoy that freedom, more people must take an active part in educating the nontechnical population about several important distinctions that are lost in the blitz of tabloid journalism. Most important, people in cyberspace are citizens, not criminals, nor do the citizens tolerate the criminals among them; however, law enforcement agencies have a commitment to constitutional protections of individual rights, and any breach of those rights in the pursuit of criminals threatens the freedoms of other citizens' rights to free speech and assembly.

This statement reemphasizes one of the major issues that have continued to dominate discussions on Internet research, i.e. the issue of governance and control and whether or not the Internet should be left without restrictions as to who can place what content (Lum, Figliola and Weed, 2012).

Sharp (1973) has provided perhaps the most comprehensive list of types of non-violent protest to date, but this list excluded online protests because he was writing at a time when computers were not a household equipment. Meanwhile, the Internet has become and remains a platform for many activities, including protests. The Internet has been used to mobilize street protests and it has also served as the place of protests. Among the common forms of online protests are online petitions, creation of campaign websites, verbal protests in blogs, Internet bulletin boards, online community sites, podcasts and You-Tube type websites.

A differentiation has been made between four types of online activism, namely: cultural, social, political and nationalistic (Yang, 2009). Although social and cultural activism online could be political in some ways, Yang (2009) proposes that political activism on the Internet be separated from them because of its

oppositional nature, which emanates from its focus on human rights, political reforms and other issues relating to demand for good governance.

Petitions24.com, iPetitions.com and Gopetitions.com are examples of sites that provide free hosting for online petitions. The sites come with tools that make creating online petitions possible for users. For instance, petitions24 has tabs that display most popular petitions, the most recent ones and the last signed ones as well as a discussion forum, where users express their opinion on the topic of protest. The site also allows sympathizers of a given cause to sign a petition to express their support. It provides statistics on the number of signatories and the rate at which the petitions are signed by supporters over time. The site allows users to embed their petitions in their own websites; it does not allow signatories to sign multiple times and verifies signatures through e-mails. These measures are meant to give credibility to the protests.

The largest online protest in history was the January 18th 2012 protest against the SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act) and PIPA (Protect Internet Protocol Act), Internet censorship bills that were to be passed by the US House of Representatives and Senate respectively. The protest, precipitated by reddit.com, Wikipedia and other groups, came in the form of voluntary websites' blackout with more than 1 billion people seeing anti-SOPA messages on January 18th. Four top-10, thirteen top-100 US websites and 115,000 small and medium sites participated in the strike action. There were ten million petition signers, over three million e-mail and over 3 million tweets mentioning words like SOPA, "PIPA", "sopastrike", "blackoutSOPA" and "stopSOPA" (<http://sopastrike.com>). The actions forced the US House of Representatives and Senate to abandon the bills and halt further debates on them.

Ricken Patel's Avaaz is considered the largest online activist group with 20 million members and many achievements as a pressure group. In terms of harnessing the Internet as a force for global change, Patel, spearheading protests with Avaaz, has disproved the notion that online protest actions are mere 'clicktivism' ventures and has pioneered a new model for advancing human rights and democracy (Anthony, 2013). However, as concluded by Vlavo (2010), no meaningful political protest can or should exclusively rely on digital technology.

The valid question arising from the above conceptual and contextual review of the literature on the use of the Internet in protests and its effectiveness is whether or not it is a potent tool that can achieve set protest action goals. The answer to this can serve as a pointer to the social meaningfulness of the Internet for those who engage it for political protests. The literature on social media has relatively extensively discussed the political use of social media on whether or not it advances the cause of political protests. It has been shown that social media's role in the success of political revolution is exaggerated to a large extent (Fuchs, 2013). However, very little or nothing has been said about the social meaningfulness of the Internet alongside its use as a protest tool.

Using Virtual Ethnography as a Method of Analysis. Various methods that have been used to study different aspects of online community life such as people’s activities online, what motivates them, how they govern themselves, what makes certain individuals to be influential among the rest, why some participate while others prefer to simply observe, etc. Most of the methods as well as theories adapted for online community studies have been borrowed from traditional research fields and they originate mostly from the social sciences, particularly sociology, anthropology, social psychology and linguistics (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005).

Virtual ethnography, as one of such methods, has been applied in the study of online communities. It involves the process of constructing an ethnography using the cyberspace as the research site. While traditional ethnographic studies seek to understand the experience of specific people in specific cultural environments, virtual ethnography uses the online environment to study its community. Citing Miller and Slater (2001), Evans (2010) asserts that immersion in a particular case, reference to a particular locality and participant observation are still the cornerstone of ethnographic research, even when using the Internet as the research site. With the cyberspace as the locality, the field becomes a bit altered but it is nevertheless a field since the participants, although scattered geographically, are together in one space on the Internet.

There are two ways of conducting ethnographic research on the Internet, i.e. distanced or involved. Involved method suggests that the investigator engages with the participants discursively and communicatively, while distanced means using texts, images, emoticons, avatars and observations (but not participation) of social interactions in online space for analysis (Evans, 2010, citing Morton, 2001 and Schwara, 1999).

Table 1

Ten Principles of Virtual Ethnography

S/N	Principle	Core idea
1	Use of ethnography to investigate the ways in which the use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful	Search for Social meaningfulness
2	Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artifact	Social media as cultural artifact
3	The ethnography of mediated interaction often asks researchers to be mobile both virtually and physically	Demands virtual and physical mobility of researcher
4	Instead of going to particular field sites, virtual ethnography follows field connections	Using connections between communities in drawing conclusions
5	Boundaries, especially between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real,’ are not to be taken-for-granted	Noting where virtual and real life connections meet
6	Virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement rather than long-term immersion	Investigator’s engagement is intermittent

End of tabl. 1

S/N	Principle	Core idea
7	Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. Accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular re-search questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities	Conclusions based on issues pertinent to investigator's interests
8	Intensive engagement with mediated interaction adds an important reflexive dimension to ethnography	Interaction is computer mediated
9	This is ethnography of, in and through the virtual. We learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it and seeing it manifest in other social settings	Conclusions drawn based on observations about online communities
10	Virtual ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself	Conclusions drawn based on what is available in cyberspace at the time of study

S o u r c e : Adapted from Hine (2000), cited in Evans (2010).

Using virtual ethnography in a distanced manner to examine online communities in Nigeria, the principles of virtual ethnography are employed as a guide (see Table 1) in this study. Because we are interested in establishing whether or not the observed online communities see the Internet as socially meaningful, an attempt is made to identify and highlight trends that support (or otherwise) the notion that virtual communities see social meaningfulness in their engagement of the Internet as a tool for furthering their community interests. Consequently, the first principle becomes the instrument of analysis in the study. In other words, of the ten principles of virtual ethnography highlighted by Hine (2000) as cited by Evans (2010), the first one (Table 1) is selected as tool for analysis of identified virtual communities within the framework of the study. The obvious significance of this principle lies in that it is useful in determining whether or not virtual communities are engaging in “clicktivism” – a concept used to describe mere engagement with online sympathizers without much result in real life.

An Internet search, using Google and the queries “online communities” and “online communities in Nigeria,” produced over ten websites. Several months of observation showed that three of the websites were found to be more dynamic in terms of users’ online activity. These sites are: *www.nairaland.com*, *www.nigerianstalk.org* and *http://community.vanguardngr.com*. The sites are also observed to portray a more extensive coverage of human interest topics and activities on them seem to be consistent. The three websites provide forums for discussion on various topics ranging from politics, entertainment, technology, to sports, business and celebrity gossips. These topics are presented under the main heading tagged *Forum* by the three web sites.

Social meaningfulness can be a function of two factors in relations with Internet studies: (1) the Internet’s readiness to meet the various demands and needs of people in their quest to express themselves in response to the demands of

their environment, (2) the ability of the Internet to respond to and keep pace with increasing demand and changing usage entrenches this meaningfulness. Concern over the Internet's ability to sustain this responsiveness has been raised with respect to two trends i.e. the increasing growth in access world wide, especially in developing countries, and rapid growth in usage by existing and new users (Kende, 2012). It is noteworthy that the second trend is driven by demand for video and other new and exciting service contents (Kende, 2012).

The Internet's ability to cope with growth in demand is sustained by technology, investment and innovation. In order words, the social meaningfulness of the Internet and the content delivered through its numerous platforms is a function of the rate of *technological growth in the sector, the level of investment of resources and innovativeness in terms of technological input and operational models that are aimed at delivering more and better to users at lesser costs.*

Introduction of new technologies in core and access networks have provided the Internet, and by extension its users, multiple capacities for increased sharing of online data. This has led to the continued growth in consumer Internet activities that make virtual presence of people and groups a possibility. Such activities include file sharing, internet video, web e-mail and data transfer, online gaming and VoIP (internet telephony).

The web sites observed in the study (i.e. *www.nairaland.com, www.nigerianstalk.org and http://community.vanguardngr.com*) provide users with some of these features, which support the activities of users (community members or visitors) for various purposes on the platforms of popular social media applications. This makes for the conclusion that these virtual community sites are not significantly deficient in terms of user-required, technological-supported features. In terms of technological growth for the purpose of meeting users' demand, the sites can be said to be socially significant.

On the issue of investment, the observed websites in terms of consistency and standard cannot be said to be inferior to other non-Nigerian online community sites. That these websites can support the kind of traffic generated by the community members is a testimony to the substantial amount of investment made in capacities.

Innovation as a function of social meaningfulness is seen in the light of the observed websites' reach to different groups who are interested in different topics and who initiate discussions on subjects that are of interest to them. Innovativeness is reflected in the growing number of users who join these online communities due to the sites' ability to meet their demand for new ways to connect with people of similar interests participate in discussions.

Conclusion. Whereas the observed websites exhibited traits of online communities, with the presence of members who share common interests, the sites tend not to have coordinated platforms for sustained political protests. The sem-

blance of protests and criticisms of political nature on these sites are individual opinions that usually receive response from a few other users and nothing more. The preliminary conclusion is that although the sites tend to be socially meaningful based on the prescribed criteria of virtual ethnography, using them as online platforms for effective protests and policy criticism is not viable, since they tend not to be sites for bringing together sustained critical and protesting communities that can cause real changes.

The need to focus attention on other dimensions to the understanding of technology has been put forward by Fuchs (2013) in highlighting the existence of a critical outlook on the role of social media in political revolutions in the works of Morozov (2010), Dean (2005) and Gladwell (2010). He concludes that notions such as Twitter revolution and Twitter mob are reflections of belief in technological determinism, which is based on the premise that it is the Internet itself that is responsible for revolutionary changes, thereby overestimating the role of technology in society. This position is affirmed by the current study by showing that there are more than one-sided effects of good or bad in technologies. "Technology is conditioned and not determined by society and vice versa" (Fuchs, 2013). The users or community members of the websites observed in this study have used their respective sites to voice grievances as part of their other adapted uses of the Internet sites. They did not see the platforms solely as sites for protests and so the "community media" have become useful for other things as well, aside from for political or social criticism.

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ОНЛАЙН-СООБЩЕСТВА И ПРОТЕСТНЫЕ ДВИЖЕНИЯ: СОЦИАЛЬНАЯ ЗНАЧИМОСТЬ ИНТЕРНЕТА КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТА КРИТИКИ ПОЛИТИКИ

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В статье дается анализ формирования такого явления, как медиасообщество, которое создается и управляется сообществом людей, находящихся в одном географическом пространстве или объединенных общими интересами, и значительно отличается как от коммерческих, так и от государственных СМИ или общественного вещания. Автор отмечает, что роль медиасообщества становится особенно очевидной, когда люди сталкиваются с обстоятельствами, которые проверяют их способность держаться вместе и формировать единый фронт в борьбе с проблемой. С другой стороны, задача медиасообщества – выдвижение идеи в публичной сфере. Независимо от проблем и проводимой политики, граждане, использующие платформу медиасообщества, хотят иметь арену, чтобы донести свои идеи до других и быть услышанными. Автор подчеркивает, что медиасообщество может проявляться в различных печатных и электронных способах, в том числе существовать на базе новых цифровых медиаплатформ. Следовательно, в настоящее время существует большое количество возможностей для возникновения интернет-сообществ, которые служат в качестве платформ для озвучивания претензий к проводимой непопулярной государственной политике с помощью блогов, вики, веб-блогах и социальных сетей. В работе предпринята попытка, используя виртуальную этнографию как метод наблюдения, критически оценить значение медиасообществ в Нигерии и рассмотреть их в контексте растущей тенденции выражать социальные и политические протесты через Интернет с помощью тех, кто не имеет доступа к массовой информации или Сети. Сделан вывод о том, что хотя Интернет стал общественно полезным для сообществ, он не в состоянии дать им значительные рычаги в оказании влияния на политические решения в социальной и политической сферах.

Ключевые слова: виртуальное сообщество, протест, медиасообщества, интернет-сообщества, цифровая платформа.