

NIGERIA'S END SARS PROTEST: IS SOCIAL MEDIA AN INSTRUMENT OF VIOLENT MOBILISATION?

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Abstract

Social media platforms have emerged as one of the key drivers of political socialisation. Also, political socialisation and mobilisation have taken on a new form and expression as a result of the acceleration of globalisation and the growing acceptance of the culture of social media. The reach of social media stretches farther and takes on a different form than the conventional reach and shape of traditional media, which has a number of repercussions. This paper argues that social media has become a legitimate and real weapon of political mobilisation, sensitisation, and socialisation, using the END SARS protest as a case study. According to the study's findings, people and activists may participate in self-mobilisation and engagement activities through social media platforms, depending on their grievances. Thus, social media has become a venue for disseminating news and ideas that have mobilised people to participate in violent political activities. This is partly because the material on social media is not controlled, and technological manipulations of facts are possible. Even while the positive aspects of social media should be embraced, acknowledged, and promoted by nations worldwide, there is a pressing need to oversee its use in disseminating violent-prone texts and images that might lead to social and political turmoil.

Keywords: Social Media, Instrument, END SARS Protest, Violent Mobilisation, Nigeria.

Introduction

The emergence of civilisation led to the development of modern mass media such as newspapers, magazines, radios, and televisions. The broadcast of information to a vast and diverse audience concurrently via the mass media, which may generally be divided into print media and electronic media, is called mass communication. The primary functions of the mainstream media are to, amongst other things, inform, educate, amuse, socialise, mobilise, persuade, and establish agendas (Okunna&Uzochikwu, 2017).

Also, the proliferation of new technology has reduced the world to the size of a global village, and the rate at which information is spread now dramatically outpaces that of print and electronic media. To bolster the argument made above, Amana and Attah (2014) propose that the degree of social media penetration inside the nooks and crannies of contemporary society and the pace of its spread is mind-boggling. It does not take a media sociologist to figure out that the assimilation rate of social media is far quicker than the absorption of other media that came before it (Nsude&Onwe, 2017).

However, it is essential to keep in mind that the media is potent because they may, on the one hand, fight against insecurity and, on the other hand, pose risks to security. The mass media are the many channels via which information may be sent to and received by members of society. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are the four mainstays that make up the contemporary man's conventional sources of information from the mass media.

The survival of humans or their well-being is put in jeopardy when incidents that threaten national security occur. Defending the lives, rights, dignities, and property of Nigeria's inhabitants is essential to the country's national security. Additionally, it includes ensuring the preservation of the nation's legitimate institutions, as well as its resources, cultural heritage, territorial borders, and overall sovereignty. The purpose of maintaining national security is to ensure that all of the country's residents can maintain living circumstances that are fair and equal. On the other hand, those in charge of the nation have been unsuccessful in this regard. Security refers to the government's capabilities to defend its population and the state from foreign invasion and domestic uprising. These capabilities may be divided into defensive and offensive categories (Ali, 2013).

The purpose of the state is to protect its citizens, maintain public order, and provide other essential services. The independence of the press and speech is an essential component of national security, and a genuine democracy cannot function without it. Both freedoms of speech and freedom of the media are crucial components of a democratic society. The most significant obstacle facing Nigeria's mainstream media in the modern era is figuring out how to remain relevant to the country's population, especially when democracy is being tested and national institutions are still taking form. In order for the press to keep its independence intact, it has to proceed with caution and use prudence. In light of this, Nigeria's culture, religion, security, and traditions should be handled with the greatest care. This is especially important because Nigeria is a multi-ethnic state (Ali, 2013).

The struggle for power and the need for transformation have always been pervasive themes in any society that has adopted democratic ideals. Politicians that want control will work via political parties to accomplish their objectives, and these parties will support the politicians' ideas, ambitions, and goals. Those interested in overthrowing the current order and advancing the principles of revolution often organise into organisations to put their beliefs into action. However, to realise their objectives and goals, neither party can do so until they have the backing of the majority of the population (Fasunwon, 2019).

However, the supporters who are the focus of this effort want persuasive information before they can board the train. At this point, the role of the media as a bona fide instrument of

political socialisation becomes apparent. The introduction of globalisation into world politics has resulted in a shift in the sociopolitical environment of international affairs. The phenomenon of globalisation may be compared to an octopus, with tentacles extending into every sphere of human activity and contact. The nature, timeliness, and effectiveness of the internet have all undergone significant alterations and technical developments in recent years, contributing to globalisation's growing power (Fasunwon, 2019).

Therefore, in this age of globalisation, the internet plays a significant role in forming political views, promoting political involvement, and impacting voting behaviour worldwide. Therefore, social media is the new information network and information technology, using a form of communication that uses interactive and user-produced material, and allows for the creation and maintenance of interpersonal connections. Therefore, social media encourages engagement and public involvement over various topics that are of significance to humans. As a result, the unrestricted and participatory nature of social media has provided the general population with an abundance of possibilities to participate in conversations about various topics relevant to Nigeria (Fasunwon, 2019).

Additionally, social media has been linked to the wave of protests by young people who went to the streets and staged demonstrations to voice their disapproval of the actions of a police unit known as SARS. In 1992, the Nigerian Police Force established a team known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad, or SARS, to combat violent crimes. In contrast to other law enforcement personnel, SARS agents were given the freedom to operate in innovative methods and were encouraged to take a hard line against organised crime. Despite this, claims of abuse by SARS personnel, ranging from extortion and abduction to rape and extrajudicial executions, have been published (Obia, 2020).

The allegations sparked the #EndSARS campaign, which started as a protest against police violence on Twitter in 2016 and used the hashtag. The first phase of demonstrations began on October 3, 2020, when a video allegedly showed SARS personnel murdering a guy and escaping with his car in the Delta area of Southern Nigeria. The video was uploaded to Twitter and shared by a user. Within a short time, decentralised and youth-led demonstrations against police brutality spread across Nigeria and beyond its borders (Obia, 2020).

It is obvious that social media was the primary means by which information on the location, strategy, and organisation of the protest against the end of SARS was circulated. It is undoubtedly possible to consider social media to be the technical innovation that has gained the most significant widespread acceptance in the 21st century. Both excellent and harmful agendas are promoted via social media. Terrorists, separatists, political organisations, religious groups, and other types of groups and people throughout the world are utilising social media to disseminate their information and beliefs.

Framework

The New Social Movement Theory was chosen as the basis for this study's theoretical framework. The failure of traditional Marxist theories to adequately explain collective behaviours led to the rise in popularity of new social movement theories in Europe in the decades following the 1960s (Buechler, 1995). The new ideas shifted the focus away from just

economic factors and toward political, intellectual, cultural, and even more fundamental aspects. It brought to the forefront socio-political group motivators such as race, nationality, gender, sexuality, and so on. At that point, political and societal shifts started transforming theoretical methods to comprehend controversial political issues. Scholars' interpretations and perceptions of group actions shifted from irrational outbursts to movement activities with definite objectives as a result of the unprecedented rise in civil rights, peace, student, women's, and other forms of demand for accountability movements that occurred in the late 1960s (vanStekelenburg&Klandermans, 2009). New social movement ideas are developed within an intellectual framework that is defined by questions about basic human rights in relation to the state's rights over its inhabitants.

As a result, both the times and the political landscape have continued to shift at a rate that has never been seen before thanks to ICT innovation and globalisation. Since the 1990s, the context of contentious politics has grown inextricably intertwined with the advancement processes of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have resulted in massive global internet penetration and usage of social media, thereby giving birth to the age of new media. The driver and channel of communication for increasingly dispersed group belongings has shifted to social networking websites in recent years (Norris, Walgrave, & van Aelst, 2005).

The dissemination of information and the spread of networks are the fundamental characteristics of social mobilisation. As such, they form a platform for socio-political contention, which has the tendency to normalise protests and demonstrations in this age of massive group awareness and consciousness. As a result, when seen in this light, it is possible to deduce that a number of factors existing in the social, political, and economic sectors of life all contribute to the creation of social movements. Invariably, the new social movement is significant in explaining the potential reasons, birth, development, and even revival of political demonstrations.

Methodology

This research design was conceived as a review article (Petticrew and Roberts, 2008). The primary goal of this study is to help readers, via a review of relevant material, comprehend how social media contributed to the End SARS protest. In accordance with the approach followed by Alshurafat, Al Shbail, and Mansour, this study has utilized a two-stage search for relevant literature (2021). In the first phase, a search using the terms "End SARS," "End SARS protest," "Social media in Nigeria," and "Information gathering." was carried out. Relevant studies were retrieved from the following databases: Taylor & Francis Online, Emerald Group, Elsevier, JSTOR, SSRN, Scopus, SAGE Journals Online, Wiley Online Library, and Springer Link.

To find the cited works from the first stage's identification, the next step is to do a snowball search. Only articles written in English were considered for the search. Many of the articles chosen were written in the past decades, although the selection spans a full two decades (2002-2022). Relevant studies were found via the search and evaluated thoroughly. Studies on forensic social media, protests against SARS, and SARS eradication were chosen for this review.

Technological innovations and the Advent of Social Media

The advent of modern technology, namely the exponential growth of the internet and web-based media, has fundamentally altered the composition of the media landscape. The more people start using information and communication technologies, the more gadgets and apps keep developing and engaging them in ways that have never been seen before. The proliferation of devices running Android, iOS, and Windows connected to the internet has opened up previously imagined opportunities for the digitalisation of media technology. The emergence of new forms of digital communication has led to the development of interactive web apps that are used to describe a phenomenon that is more popularly known as social media (Chiamogu, Obikeze, Chiamogu&Odikpo, 2021).

Therefore, social media is an interactive web-based application that enables users to network with one another, socialise with one another, interact with one another (communicate), share and disseminate information, knowledge, and market ideas and products at little or relatively no cost to one another (Baruah, 2012). The distinctive characteristics that set it apart from other forms of online communication are the instantaneity, interactivity, virality, seamlessness, and cost-effectiveness of social media. Social media platforms or sites are web-based programs that emphasise user interactions on end-to-end encryption. These interactions may take place using end-to-end encryption. It requires involvement and interoperability on the part of end users in the form of sharing postings, comments, experiences, and ideas in a variety of formats, such as audio and video snippets.

Group Consciousness and Political Demonstrations

This is an excellent notion that defines a circumstance in which members of a group (ethnic, racial, religious, political, sectional, etc.) that share specific unique linkages come to discover and/or become conscious of how their identities and concerns, including their history, background are connected. As a result of this circumstance, members of the organisation are forced to band together, form alliances, and prepare themselves to advocate for their commonly held beliefs in the context of aggressive competition with other groups and the state (Chiamogu et al., 2021).

Membership in the group and individual recognition are necessary preconditions for achieving collective awareness. The manifestation of a feeling of belonging to a group by its members is referred to as group membership; on the other hand, the emotionally significant role that the group plays in the lives of its members is referred to as group identification. Intriguingly, group consciousness can generate collective feelings of resentment that translate to nationalism and other feelings, including dedication to the advancement of shared heritage in response to situations of injury or injustice through means such as a belief system, religious practice, shared recitals, or demonstrations expressed in sync with other members (Chiamogu *et al.*, 2021).

This entices and attracts members to participate in rallies, demonstrations, and protests that are thought to enhance the common interests of the group's participants. A threat around the regions of common interests, using harm to members or the whole group as a manner of articulating the injury, may stimulate and arouse collective action for the group, which may occur in the form of socio-political demonstrations.

Political Protest in the Era of Social Media

A political protest is a term that may refer to either an organised action or an effort by a group of people to bring about the cessation of an injury or injustice that is seen to exist inside a political system. It is the public expression of critical viewpoints, dissenting opinions, oppositional positions, or general displeasure with a policy or action taken by the government. These kinds of activities, especially peaceful ones, are not primarily aimed at forcibly removing the political leadership from power; rather, they are directed at drawing the attention of the political leadership to the need to change a situation that is harmful to a group, a section, or the general public. Protests on the political level are not the same thing as revolutions; rather, they are analogous to political demonstrations of peaceful assembly, which are tolerated in democratic nations (Chiamogu et al., 2021).

Most of the time, individuals protest because they believe that all other legal and conventional measures of asking the government to rectify the harms and injustices done to them are useless. Protests against political institutions may take both violent and non-violent forms. When protests are organised as a strike, a sit-at-home day, a peaceful march or demonstration, open letters, or press releases, these actions are said to be non-violent. On the other hand, violent demonstrations are public events that entail property damage, infliction of physical injuries and deaths, and the vandalism of public assets. Political protesters that do not engage in violence often receive permission from law enforcement officials before beginning their actions, and such demonstrations are typically organised and led by activists.

What is more, the use of social media groups and membership in those groups inspire a sense of engagement or loyalty in their users, who, by reading, watching, or listening to the contents that are shared, are incited and mobilised to rise against other groups or even the state. This sense of engagement or loyalty is generated by social media groups and membership in social media groups. Members of groups post resentful, damaging information, views, and hateful ideas on collaborative social media handle such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Telegram, and other similar platforms. This information, views, and ideas are easily internalised, shared, and commented upon in tones that heighten emotions, which propel anger and animosity against other groups or the state (Chiamogu et al., 2021).

In this way, hateful actions stemming from governance challenges that are contributing to mass poverty, a dysfunctional educational system, poor access to healthcare, tremendous graduate unemployment, police brutality, and a despicable state of public infrastructure are propagated and communicated to the people in the form of deleterious narratives and damaging innuendos using social media platforms to generate public sympathies that coalesce to mass outrage. These conditions are unbearable both socio-economically and politically. Users, therefore, make nasty comments in the form of resentful tales, which will drive and urge group members to rise up to fight the abusers or even alter the status quo in order to seek justice and a fair share of values in the state.

Social Media's Impacts on #EndSARs# Protests in Nigeria

The introduction of social media in the 1990s signified a pivotal moment in the development of communication networks (Cammerts, 2015). There are now billions of individuals all over the globe who use the internet and are digitally connected. Even the economies that are still

in the process of growing have begun to execute various plans in order to guarantee that their populations have access to the most recent technology advancements (Obaid, 2020). As a result of the current worldwide epidemic of COVID-19, people have been compelled to remain inside, and the only forms of contact that are available to them are electronic. This has further made the global economy more technologically compliant (Ajisafe, Ojo, Tinuade&Monyani, 2021).

As a direct consequence of this, those who were previously unable to connect to communication networks are now able to do so, thanks to the proliferation of social media in today's unstable political atmosphere. People worldwide are now more likely to communicate and discuss their views, opinions, and ideas because of the proliferation of social media. People no longer have to depend on the information that is already available from a media organisation since, among other things, social media platforms have provided them with the chance to acquire information from other people on a one-on-one basis (Ohia &Salawu, 2020).

The Nigerian community has also experienced a massive surge in the usage of social media, which has benefited the various social movements that have taken place over the past two years, including the #EndSARs social training that gained global visibility. As the increase in the usage of web 2.0 technology made waves around the world, the Nigerian community also experienced this increase. Throughout the last ten years in Nigeria, social movements have been an extremely important factor (Ojedokun, Ogunleye, and Aderinto) (2021).

Social tasks are executed to communicate complaints, interests, criticisms, and suggested solutions on certain recognised issues via collective actions. These social activities are generally started by a group of activists or actors that are opposed to the government. Throughout history, social movements have always had these essential people at the helm, leading and coordinating the demonstrations. However, social media has effectively supplanted the pre-existing mobilisation institutions and has developed into an essential resource for organising and coordinating social movements worldwide (Ojedokun et al., 2021).

The use of social media not only affects the mobilisation of resources and makes it easier for social movements to restructure their ties with one another. In addition to this, it made it possible to reorganise public spheres and completely altered the flow of communication and information across society. Because of this, a considerable adjustment has been made to the architecture of the social network. According to Obaid (2020), social media exerts two major effects on social movements. These influences are significant in their own right.

The first advantage is that recruiting, mobilisation, communication, and the transmission of information can all be sped up using social media. This opens up new mobilisation areas that were not previously available with more conventional mobilisation strategies. It makes it possible for billions of individuals worldwide to connect with one another via social media programs like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The social media network has also acted as a platform for different individuals, races, ethnic groups, and identities to share, build, and collect their emotions or feelings, which has led to a new type of virtual collective identity that

social movements have capitulated upon for their protests. This has led to a new kind of collective identity that has led to a new type of social movement (Cammerts, 2015).

The most significant impact that social media has had is that it has made it possible to validate information instantly, which helps to counteract the system's inherent media bias. Because of this transition, social movements now have the power to disseminate a constructive narrative and solicit mass sympathy. A good illustration of this concept is the social campaign known as #EndSARs. The Nigerian people have taken to the social media platform to voice their concerns, dissatisfaction, and anger with the bad leadership of the government and the structural inequality between the various areas. The majority of the population was frustrated with several aspects of the country's infrastructure, including the school system, the absence of basic infrastructure, the inconsistent power supply (electricity), insufficient health care, and poor roads, to name just a few (Olabamiji& Mariam, 2020).

Social Media Groups in Nigeria

In Nigeria, the use of smart phones and other android devices has been revolutionised due to the widespread availability of broadband internet and internet penetration. According to Amobi, Obikeze, Uchechukwu&Chiamogu (2021) Nigeria's number of people using the internet reached a record high of 104.4 million in January 2021, representing a record internet penetration of 50 percent. This represents an increase of 19 million users, or 22 percent, compared to the statistics from 2020. The number of mobile connections in Nigeria reached 187.9 million in January 2021, which is comparable to 90 percent of the country's entire population. In a similar vein, the number of people using social media platforms rose to 33 million in January 2021, a rise of 6 million from the previous year's numbers reflecting an increase of 22 percent. In January of 2021, the number of people in Nigeria who were active on social media platforms was 15.8 percent of the country's total population (Amobi et al., 2021).

Table 1 below illustrates the demographic breakdown of these social media users based on their various platforms. According to the data, WhatsApp messenger is the most popular platform, accounting for 93 percent of users, followed by Facebook (86.2 percent), Youtube (81.6 percent), Instagram (73.1 percent), and Twitter, which accounts for 61.4 percent of users.

Table 1 As of the third quarter of 2020, the social media sites with the most use in Nigeria are presented below:

S/N	Social Media Site	Approximate percentage
1	WhatsApp	93
2	Facebook	86.2
3	Youtube	81.6
4	Instagram	73.1
5	FacebookMessenger	67.2

6	Twitter	61.4
7	Telegram	56.3
8	Linkedin	32.8
9	Tiktok	31.9
10	Snapchat	31.2
11	Pinterest	26.8
12	Skype	12.1
13	GoogleHangout	11.6
14	Reddit	9.1
15	WeChat	5.7
16	Tumblr	4.1

Source: Amobi *et al.*, 2021.

There are several different chat groups on social media platforms where Nigerian users may participate in social activities, connect, communicate with one another, and exchange information and ideas. Table 1 illustrates that Nigerians utilize more social media platforms that offer messengers where users can quickly be added or join group discussions. Examples of such platforms are Facebook messengers and WhatsApp messengers. Consequently, there are several chat groups on both WhatsApp and Facebook, including ones for communities, villages, families, professional associations, labour unions, alumni chat groups, social clubs, etc. These chat groups cover a wide range of geographic and demographic categories (Amobi *et al.*, 2021).

On social media, there is a staggering amount of membership for every sectional or clannish interest group in Nigeria, even many that you could never conceive of existing. The vast majority of Nigerians who use social media are added to groups without their knowledge or consent. Many women remain members of these organizations, because they feel they cannot function well without their contacts and connections and the pleasure of obtaining access to new knowledge and technology. A smaller group of people chooses and decides which groups to join. According to Amobi *et al.* (2021), many people join groups or chat rooms because of their enthusiasm, compassion, want for information and education, and need to feel like they belong somewhere.

Social Media Restriction and the Nigerian Government

The recent situation in Nigeria about the suspension of Twitter operations in the country serves as an instructive example of how national governments in Africa react to and respond

to social media usage in policy-making and decision-making processes. According to a report that was published in the Guardian news on June 5, 2021, the Federal Government of Nigeria has indefinitely barred the use of the microblogging and social networking website Twitter inside the nation (Erezi, 2021).

This report states that the Minister of Information and Culture of Nigeria, Lai Mohammed, said that the consistent use of Twitter tends to undermine the corporate life of Nigeria. In addition, the government of Nigeria instructed the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) to get started on issuing licenses for all over-the-top (OTT) and social media activities inside the nation. According to the article, the disagreement between the government of Nigeria and Twitter began in October 2020 when the co-founder of Twitter showed his support for the #EndSars youth rallies against police brutality in Nigeria. These protests were taking place in Nigeria at the time (Erezi, 2021).

The Nigerian government believes that Twitter, as an efficient platform for communication and information dissemination, could be used to organize Nigeria's youth and other Nigerians in opposition to government policies and decision-making processes. This belief is based on the fact that Twitter has become increasingly popular in Nigeria. On the other hand, this assumption would be incorrect due to the fact that the government of Nigeria could actually make the most of social media, with the exception of Twitter, in order to seek the opinions and advice of its citizens on matters pertaining to good governance and how the country could move forward (Ajisafe et al., 2021).

The point is that if the youth in Nigeria were able to successfully utilize Social Media to organize themselves and herald their concerns on the socio-economic and political zigzags of the Nigerian state, to the extent that the whole world consequently rallied around them in solidarity, then the government of Nigeria should understand that it has Social Media at its disposal to initiate and communicate relevant policies and programs that would add values to its citizenry. Suppose the youth in Nigeria successfully utilised Social Media to organize themselves and herald. In that case, It is important to highlight that the usage of Twitter has been made illegal in Nigeria, which amounts to a restriction placed on the people of that country's access to a platform for free expression as well as their right to freedom of speech in democratic states (Ajisafe *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

Extensive internet penetration, the availability of broadband internet, the usage of smartphones and other android devices have transformed the socio-political landscape of Nigeria by creating chances for the airing of complaints and the demand that the government of Nigeria be held accountable. The widespread usage of social media platforms that are not subject to any kind of governmental oversight is a major contributor to the rise in the number of sociopolitical demonstrations in Nigeria in response to ongoing injustices and insensitivity on the part of the government. This paved way for the #EndSars protests in Nigeria which were organized and carried out in large part via the use of the various social media platforms.

During the demonstration, various types of false information were reported, including incorrect information that was spread inadvertently with or without intention to deceive

others. However, what is more essential is that a widespread understanding has been generated that social media may be used to gradually shift the perpetually repugnant old system and support revolution towards a better society. It is therefore recommended that the use of social media platforms should not be encouraged for disseminating false information, misinformation, or fake news, all of which have the potential to provoke social and global unrest. Also, the process of spreading information on social media must have appropriate safeguards, such as checks and balances.

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