

The Essentiality and Locus of Social Media Policy in Nigeria

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Abstract

This is a critical essay that examines the essentially and locus of social media policy in Nigerian communication policy at the national and institutional levels. It theoretically examines the communication and media environments in Nigeria and how the complexity and peculiarity of the environment triggers the need for separate social media policy that will deal with how citizens in respective of their social, political and economic status should understand and use social media. The proposition is made within the argument of common interest theory, which provides a balanced submission between utilitarian and unitary approaches to social policies that discussed common interest as factor for the essentiality of policies such social media policy. The paper, after examining issues involved in the formulation, adoption and implementation, submitted that social media policy in Nigeria, should be standalone from broader communication policy because of its separate, popularity, acceptability and usability much more than the conventional media such as radio and television.

Keywords: Social Media, Policy, Social Media Policy, Media Policy, Nigeria.

1. Introduction

Communication, media and information are vital components of social fabric of the modern society that are normally regulated through governmental, organisational, professional and individual mechanisms. The political system brand practiced in a society determines reasonably the policy and regulation mechanisms toward communication and media.

Thus, communication and media in societies that traditionally exercise liberal democratic system are regulated essentially through organisational, professional and individual policies. On the other hand, societies that are normally dictatorial and oppressive to the field have stiff governmental policies to regulate communication and media components of social composition.

Within the communication and media environment, policy can viewed a set of explanations, intentions, principles and guidelines as well as process and actions in order to offer explanations and actualisation of the set wishes, principles and objectives (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine 2010). Formulation and indeed realisation of the properly wishes are guided by the social, economic and political systems that can be global, regional or national depending on the stripe of the communication and media problems that warrant the wishes and preparation of policy to address the problem.

For instance, the communication problems in 60s, 70s and 80s were on issues of flaws in communication flow, content distortion, cultural alienation, external influence, absence of communication and media democratisation among others (MacBride, 1980). This kind of problems orchestrated and also aided by technological advancements led to the constitution of International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The report of the study popularly known as McBride Report that recommended the formulation and implementation of national and international communication policies that will help in addressing communication problems that are compounded by the dilemma of new technology that had “ambiguous consequences” and come up with enormous “risks and stumbling blocks” (MacBride, 1980).

Though most of those problems are yet to be addressed, but communication researchers, politicians, industrialist, public relations practitioners, advertisers and indeed government and policy makers are in this 21st Century are now being confronted and challenged by the problems related to use and abuse of social media and internet as whole. McQuail (1998, p219) argues that communication policy in general or media policy is particular would hardly disappear because of “the emergence of entirely new media, the fundamental rearrangement of the ‘old media’ such as the telephone and the complex trends in globalisation”. Hence, internet and social media in particular are most fundamental reshuffles within communication and media milieu that make policy within the industry paramount and necessary especially due to what I call ‘communication over democratisation’. This means that the excessive liberalisation of media in terms of ownership, usage and content requires the need for a unique but unified policy that will ensure moderation. Hence the need for specific social media policy.

In other words, since MacBride period and report, however, the collective international voice that calls for a 21st century holistic communication policy or specific one that addresses and demands for the formulation of national social media policy has been echoed and loudly popularised.

Therefore, the main thrust of this critical essay is to examine the essentially and locus of social media policy particularly in Nigerian communication and media atmosphere at both governmental, organisational and individual levels. It contributes to the emerging but silent debate on the need for the structural regulation of

social media not only in Nigeria but Africa and world in general.

2. Social Media Conceptualisation and Communication Environment

Clear understanding and conceptualisation of a phenomenon are essential to policy formulation and implementation. In fact they are not only essentialities for proper articulation and successful realisation of social media policy but also in understanding the meaning, functions and dysfunctions of social media in a society (Nielsen, 2015). It is hard to understand social media with degree of precision that involves validity and reliability and since so little is known about it and though so many people pronounce to know about it. Therefore Nielsen (2015) states that social media:

as an imprecise term referring loosely to a very large and diverse set of relatively new technologies and practices with no natural edges that are evolving very rapidly, often intersect with each other and many other phenomena in complex ways...

However, no matter the imprecision in defining and understanding social media that will epistemologically assist in overcoming the difficulty, scholars (such as Fuchs & Trottier, 2015; Trottier & Fuchs, 2014; Chilwa, & Adegoke, 2013; Frentasia, 2012; Daramola & Hamilton, 2011; Lotan et al., 2011; Caristi, 2011) have made philosophical, empirical and professional attempts to define and situate social media in global community, especially if one looks at how it has been hugged and used by governments, politicians, companies, students, civil society organisations, terrorists and indeed in the surveillance of the society. For example, according to Trottier and Fuchs (2014) social media is associated with User Generated Content, convergence culture, participatory media, peer production and web 2.0. They further argued that Internet and indeed even the conventional media are social on their own right especially if someone looks at 'social' from the sociological perspectives that discussed 'social fact', 'social action' and 'community'.

But whatever the arguments social media is concept that was commenced in 2005. It is part of the virtual platforms brought and fortified by the emergence, growth and rapid expansion of Internet, particularly as result of the introduction of Web 2.0 technology, which allows easy connectivity, interactivity, participation, conservativeness, openness and anonymity (Fuchs & Trottier, 2015; Abubakar, 2011). This new technology brings new challenges that require new policy and policy readjustments in order to address them (Caristi, 2011, p 168). The challenges generated by social media include fake news, child pornography, abuse and bullying that should be addressed via policy formulation and implementation.

The term social media is a broad concept that is nebulous and it commonly referred to *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Myspace*, *WhatsApp*, *WeChat*, *2go*, *Hi5*, *Google+*, *Wikis* and *LinkedIn* among others. It can further be advanced that there are internet-based and mobile-phone-based social media taxonomies that are dichotomized in relation to technology connection facilities (Abubakar 2016). The former is mainly relied on internet connection and personal computer or mobile phone without a need of personal mobile phone identification number. The latter requires mobile Subscriber Identification Module (SIM) Card, besides the internet connection and mobile or smart phone. However, irrespective of the taxonomy, social media generally involve, social networks such as *Facebook*, *Google+* and *Twitter*, video sharing like *YouTube*, audio sharing, and image/picture sharing sites such as *Flickr*. It should also be noted the mutual exclusivity of either of the two broad taxonomies of the sties is not very clear. There is growing convergence of all. Thus a social medium can, for instance, be both internet-based and mobile-based or audio-picture-video sharing. This is possible because of the unprecedented innovation in technology.

3. Communication Policy and Social Media Policy

Communication and social media generally are inseparable. The latter is broader than the former and it is a complex process that encompasses media whether social, mainstream, traditional, new or old. Therefore, a communication policy of a country or organisation should include types of media that should be used to communicate messages and information. Communication policy was initially located in the 1970s' Latin-American thought that influenced the MacBride Reports in 1980s, which requires communication to have cultural autonomy, democratised and use as development tools. That is why the Report states that communication policy should be considered "as a means of affirming a nation's collective identity and an instrument of social integration". Communication policy is used often interchangeably with information and media policies. However, the first two can be used synonymously but media policy is narrower than the formers, looking at the broad meaning of communication that includes media as part of its components.

The dynamism of society and communication environment, however, propel structural and systematic review of the environment and indeed the creation of new policies to respond to the changes. Sorbets (2003, p 180) argues that national communication systems in both developed and developing countries have changed as a result of the changes in the electronic and broadcast media technologies and environments. The changes are formal and informal. Formally, national governments have created new or reviewed their communication

policies to accommodate the changes that have occurred, and informally individuals have also reformed way and manner they share, source and consume communication messages. This provides an avenue for the review or creation of new policy that deals with social media.

Hence, this presupposes that social media ought to be incorporated into communication policy just like Jamaican communication policy. However, this is more applicable to governmental or national communication policies that have been reviewed to meet growing changes in communication and technological industries. In Nigeria for example, social media policy should be incorporated either as an additional section besides sections on radio, television, newspapers, magazine radio, film and adverts among others in the national mass communication policy document for the government and people of Nigeria or an independent policy. However, the social media policy can be considered and prepared independently because of the unique nature, rapid development, impact and complexity of the social media.

4. Social Media Policy: Rational and Form

The logic and rational for the formulation and implementation of social media policy can be situated within bigger ideological and political reasons for communication policy. The supplementary reason for social media policy that can be incorporated into national communication policy or a nation's policy on its own. For example, corporate companies have developed separate social media policy while some national governments such as Jamaica have incorporated social media segment into communication policy in order to guide their citizens and employees (Government of Jamaica Communication Policy, 2015).

Social media policy is not normative, but rather it is a policy that should provide framework, guidelines and set of principles that direct peoples irrespective of their social status to understand the operations of social media and eventually make them more purposeful stakeholders who understand its diverse sides. Generally policies are initiated because of the environment. It is therefore logical to argue and propose, after critical mien at the Nigerian social, cultural, religious, economic and political environments and indeed the global context, that a policy, which guides social media operation and use, is not only required because of its growing unique influence on society both developed and underdeveloped. Social media invariably deal with the areas of copyrights, piracy, fake news, child pornography and abuse, character assassination, defamation and bullying. That is why Caristi (2011) states that social media provide ample opportunity for copyright violation... because of the nature of members sharing a lot sorts of content (including pictures, music and videos) and invariably some of the contents will be copyrighted materials. He further argued that while a lot of what happens on *Facebook* is social, some of it can actually be quite political. A number of groups have formed to support or oppose particular government initiatives, and politicians have begun to exploit social networking as a way of communicating with constituents or potential constituents.

The reasons for this can be both superficial and hidden. The superficial reason means emotional and uncritical reasons that can be advanced to society or to the employees that warrant the formulation and implementation of social media policy. This means that the policy is needed because there are a lot of non-factual, rumours, fake and immoral contents on the social media that are shared for deceptive purposes. These kind of messages are against the 'national interests'. On the other hand, hidden logic means conceal reasons which are founded based on the ideological and business components. Companies provide social media policy in order to control employees from divulging information that can affect the reputation and profit generation of a company. This also includes the ability of corporate body to reduce how social media can compete in taking the attention of the employees.

Consequently, it is argued that social media policy are classified based on the level of operation, which advances the essentiality of the policy. This means the level of social structure determines how the policy should be initiated and implemented. Thus social media policy is proposed to provide guidelines on how content should deal with creation, sharing, commenting and of course likely acceptance of messages, the government and telecommunication companies that create, upgrade and monitor the social media platforms; and individuals guided by the policy.

Formal social media policy refers to well thought, formulated and documented set of guidelines that monitor, guide and protect the interests and rights of global citizens and particularly people of a nation in the social media world that shall be agreed at global, continental, national and organisational levels. This policy should be championed by the legitimate authorities such as the United Nations organisations like United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO); sovereign nation-states; regional and continental association like European Union (EU), African Union (AU) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); social media companies like *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *MySpace* and their associations such as International Telecommunication Union (ITU) (Caristi, 2010). Formal social media policy also includes guidelines developed by different governmental and corporate organisations at the micro and macro global social levels. For example, Caristi (2010, p176) stated that Forty-nine US states had signed an agreement with *Facebook* and *MySpace* 'to prevent cyber-buying' and other unwanted social activities (from their social and

cultural standards). European Union also entered similar agreement, which “includes making profile information for users under 18 searchable, use of a prominent ‘report abuse’ button on the [social media] sites and making underage profiles private by default”. He proposed that since such policy could be agreed at those levels why shouldn’t deliberate, fashion out and implement a more formal global policy on social media.

Therefore, there are four forms of identified social media policy that can be viewed and closely examined, selected and applied in Nigeria. Firstly there is in-house policy that helps in controlling users’ engagement and use of social media. It is a type of policy that is formulated, implemented and monitored by the social media companies in order to reduce the contents users are to post. Secondly, there is the corporate social media policy control. This is a policy control formulated, documented and executed by private companies in order to guide how their employees should use and interact with other people on the social media platforms. Thirdly is a form of policy is that is called individual policy control, which is very informal and personal. It is informal because it is only formulated in individual mind and implemented occasionally. Fourthly there is governmental social media policy is a form of policy that should be institutionalised.

The first three policies that control and direct the use of social media exist. But the last is yet to exist, which this project is proposing. Thus, we are yet to have governmental social media, which should be developed with legitimate backing and public supports from intellectual acumen of communication scholars, national assembly, concerned ministries such Ministry of Information and Ministry of Communication, Civil Society Organisations, media and public policy scholars, religious leaders, traditional rulers, local corporate organisations and of course global social media companies. The issues to be addressed should bother on social media literacy, privacy and copyright, fake news, child pornography and child abuse and bullying as well as political manipulation among others. This should be done with public interest in mind (Papathanassopoulos & Negrine, 2010). They argue that public interest in policy formulation is viewed from utilitarian, unitary and common interest perspectives. The first talks on the “individual values and preference”. The second on “some collective moral imperatives” that should go above private interest. The third is about “shared interest”, which means policies such as social media policy shall address issues that affect humanity without concentrating on only individual motives or dominant ideology that reigns. In other words, social media policy should look at things that would guide humanity irrespective of cultural, religious or other ideologies. For example the policy would look at issues of faking, nudity, lies, abuse and crime, which social vices that are frowned in all human society.

5. Conclusion

Policies are formulated, reviewed and implemented to address emerging issues in any society, which have the capacity to erode social, political, economic, and cultural and indeed the entire moral fabric of a society. Therefore, this paper concludes that there should be a standalone social media policy that will be separated from broader communication and Internet policies because of its separate, popularity, acceptability and usability much more than the conventional media such as radio and television. The policy should be guided by the common interest perspective, which is an intermediary argument on why policy should be initiated and implemented. The formulation and successful implementation should be adequately supported by the social media companies, stakeholders as well as national and international legal frameworks.

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