Nature and Outcome of Nigeria's #NoToSocialMediaBill Twitter Protest against the Frivolous Petitions Bill 2015

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Abstract

Focusing on the #NoToSocialMediaBill Twitter protest against the introduction of The Frivolous Petitions (Prohibition, etc.) Bill 2015, in Nigeria, this chapter examined the composition of the loudest voices that framed the protest, explored the level of engagement of those voices with the content of the bill, and analysed the nature and outcome of the protesters' reactions to the bill. To achieve these objectives, the study adopted a mixed method sequential design consisting of quantitative and qualitative content analyses with framing as the theoretical framework. Findings show that hashtag and retweet features of Twitter together functioned effectively as collective framing tools in the #NoToSocialMediaBill Protest. However, the protesters adopted fear-induced collective frames that ignored the contents of the bill. Though the frames drew global media and human rights activists' attention in support of the protesters' goal of resisting an attempt to restrict freedom of speech, they did not achieve the same with the recall of the initiator of the bill.

Chapter Preview

Introduction

Central to democratic development in any modern state is an environment that is conducive for a free press, and ultimately, freedom of speech. Since its restoration of democratic governance in 1999, Nigeria has consistently recorded low press freedom ratings compared to other equally democratic African countries (Freedom House, 2015). Apart from frequent cases of clamp down on media houses and journalists, there have been other subtle means of manoeuvre and censorship in media-government relations (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Besides, Nigerian press system has exhibited essentially partisan nature and lack of ideal professionalism as a result of ownership influence (Ojebode, 2013), political affiliation and state control. The aforementioned complications limit the ability of the Nigerian media, and by extension the Nigerian citizens, to defend the nation’s democracy despite the fundamental assumption that survival of democracy is unsure without a free press that provides a good platform for public debates. Inherent in this assumption is the fact that democracy is susceptible to abuse from the people to whom state power is entrusted. As the conventional media seems to have failed to provide the space for the citizens to contribute to the development of the Nigerian democracy, social media has created an alternative

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platform through which Nigerians, especially the youths, can participate in the democratic debates. Apart from a number of initiatives and agitations to ensure a free Nigerian press, ordinary Nigerians have also risen in defence of democracy using the free platforms provided by the Web 2.0 technologies (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012), and by extension, the social media (Campbell & Kwak, 2012; Chatora, 2012; Bosch, 2013; Price, 2013; Liu, 2014) to post socio-political commentary and participate in politics (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2012).

The dynamism, pervasiveness and spontaneity of public reactions to the introduction of the Prohibition of Frivolous Petitions and Other Related Matters Bill—officially titled *The Frivolous Petition (Prohibition, etc.) Bill 2015*—in the Senate, Nigeria's upper legislative arm, provided a case of how citizens could actively use the social media to defend the democratic principle of freedom of expression. The bill was sponsored by Senator Bala Ibn Na'Allah of APC, Kebbi South (Alade, 2015) and was passed into Committee Stage after Second Reading on December 2, 2015 (*Today,* December 6, 2015). Many Nigerians reacting through Twitter and other social media platforms considered the attempt by the Nigerian Senate to pass the bill into law as threatening to free speech and alternative platform for participating in mainstream governance and politics which social media offer. Citizen campaign against the bill started in the form of Twitter hashtag activism #NoToSocialMediaBill and culminated into #MarchOnNASS with a parallel offline march to the Senate in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city.

The timing of this bill coincided with global movement for inclusion of youths in ensuring accountability in governance. ActionAid (2015) indicates that youths are an excluded population in global development. It notes also that Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did not make any specific provision for youth inclusion in development, the costly oversight which the post-2015 development agenda, Sustainable Development Goals, seeks to address. As a result, *ActionAid* sees addressing this problem of unjust distribution of societal power and the structures that sustain it as critical to sustaining democratic development. One important way it identifies is through "young men and women playing the role of democracy watchdogs– through lobbying, campaigning and collaborative partnerships". The kind of direct involvement in governance, which ActionAid proposes, remains an aspiration in Nigeria where governance is still the preserve of the old politicians who have continued to recycle themselves in power. In the current democratic dispensation, Nigeria slides backward in youth representation in governance as known old faces were nominated, elected and appointed into major political offices.

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Chapter Preview

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Introduction

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