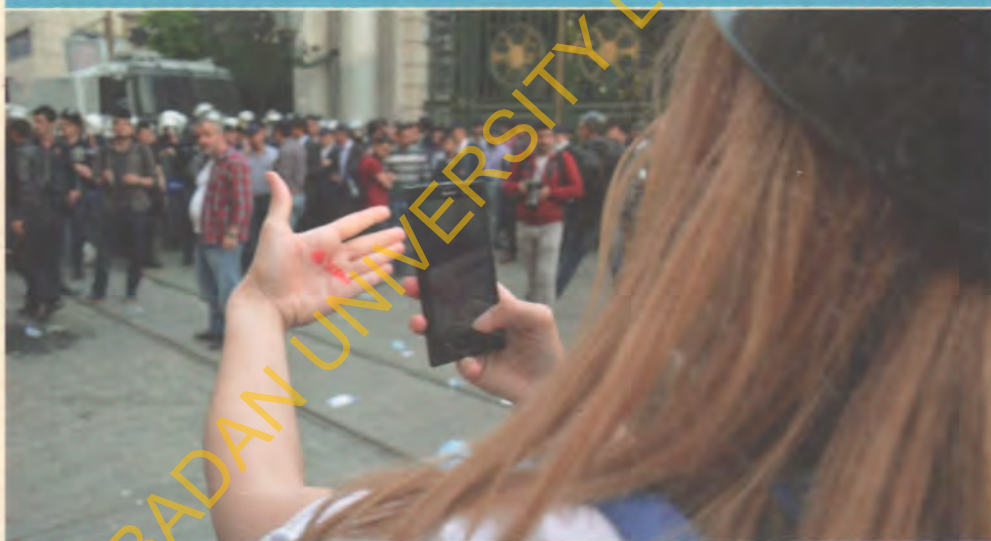


SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS



*The Transformation of
Communication Patterns*

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Chapter 3

Occupy Nigeria Movement, Organized Labor Unions, and Oil-Subsidy Struggle

An Analysis of Processes in Media(ted) "Revolution" and its Demise

Kudus Oluwatoyin Adebayo

The wave of protests of the last couple of years in different parts of the world, and the changes that accompanied it in some African, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries, have once again brought to the forefront of academic discourse the subject of the revolutionary potentials of social movements in the age of new/social media. The new order of political consciousness and socioeconomic awareness engendered by the social movements of the late twentieth century, and which crystallized in the forceful and large-scale explosion of the Arab Spring, Occupy, and *Idignados* movements in this century have fascinated political scientists, sociologists, and scholars in communications and development studies. Online depositories of scholarly commentaries, analyses, databases, and academic journals have been created to capture what is occurring and to document events as they unfold. Among other issues, scholars have dedicated a great deal of effort towards describing the technological, social, political, economic, and even cultural processes involved in these movements, providing, for why some succeeded (or failed) while, at the same time, constructing and conjecturing about their potentials in the pursuit of freedom, democracy and good governance.

To date, a crucial note of caution that resonates across academic discussion of the new social movements, which is taken as a point of departure in this present paper, relates to the need for contextual understanding of these events, even as each and every one of them appears to be linked and similar in motivation, form, and method. For instance, while acknowledging the similarity in the goals that Occupy movements articulate in their various sociopolitical and geographic settings, Kennedy (2011) emphasizes that each

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of the struggles has its own powerful and peculiar history. In raising the question of the possibility of the so-called African Spring in the wake of citizens' revolutions in the Arab world, Ford (2012) cautions against the temptation of expecting similar conditions of unemployment, poverty, official corruption' and other social ills to lead to uprising in sub-Saharan Africa. Even within the "Arab Spring" collective, Ali Mazrui (Mazrui and Tanoukhi 2011) was sure to emphasize the internal dynamics of the North African region, pointing to the similarities and relationship between revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt on the one hand and in Libya on the other hand. This is in spite of the fact that these countries have a high degree of similarities of history and culture and shared deployment of social media tools while the revolts lasted.

In examining the Occupy protest as experienced in Nigeria, this article seeks to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on dynamics of twenty-first-century social movement. The paper aims to provide a context-based description and analysis of a social protest that was inspired and influenced in important ways by global events and culture but whose processes was largely shaped by a history and geopolitics that were internal to the Nigerian society. Using the January 2012 oil-subsidy struggle as case study, two general objectives are pursued in the article: first, a descriptive objective focusing on how organizers of Occupy Nigeria Movement (ONM) stimulated the revolutionary capacity of an apathetic population, mobilized them to action, and coordinated on-street activities in Nigeria and across cities around the world, mostly through the use of new media forms; second, an analytical objective aimed at dissecting how the power structures and privileges of organized-labor unions (OLUs) enhanced and later undermined the most massive social uprising in the history of modern Nigeria.

The paper draws from primary and secondary sources, including relevant literatures, news reports, social media sites, protest documentaries, online and offline conversations, and interviews with Occupy Nigeria (ON) mobilizers and labor union officials. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: immediately after this introduction, the national context of Nigeria is presented in section 2; section 3 considers how the rise of Internet and new media technologies contributed to the resurgence of public sphere in the country; in section 4, the discussion is grounded theoretically by dialogically exploring how social actions that are mobilized in the new social media-mediated public sphere were still dependent on the vagaries of interests and power, both of which play out primarily offline rather than on the Internet; sections 5 and 6 are respectively devoted to the descriptive and analytical objectives set out earlier, while the final part concludes the paper.

THE NATIONAL CONTEXT OF NIGERIA

Nigeria is a West African nation of over 170 million people (Internet World Stats 2013), the largest, most populous black nation in the world. An ethnically diverse society, Nigeria is rich in both human and natural resources, occupying an area of 923,768 sq. km. with massive landscapes that can support all manners of economic activities, especially agriculture. Since gaining independence from the British colonialists on October 1, 1960, the country has been a ground for experimenting different political forms, although close to three decades of self-governance was spent under military rule, starting from 1966. Before oil became the mainstay of national economy, the people were actively involved in agriculture, exporting crops such as cocoa, kola nut, oil palm, cotton, and so on. When exploration for oil began, agriculture was gradually relegated to the background, and much of the food consumed in the country today is imported.

In spite of huge revenues from oil, chronic poverty is widespread among the population. For instance, close to 70% of Nigerians were estimated to be living below the poverty line of \$1/day in 1999, up from 27% in less than two decades (Nigeria 2004). A publication by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) also showed that Nigerians were generally poor, regardless of the measure employed, with about two-thirds of her citizens living in poverty (NBS 2012). While the country consistently showed signs of quantitative growth, with analysts believing in the eventual transformation of this success into actual human capital development, the challenges of corrupt and profligate public service persistently make “positive development” a mirage. As a result, needed foreign direct investment, which holds promises of both formal and informal employment for the population, has not been forthcoming. Since 1999, the country had enjoyed some fourteen years of political stability in the form of democratic governance under a single ruling party. Yet, a bulk of Nigeria’s youthful population are unemployed.

Today, the oil sector provides about 95% of foreign exchange earnings, and close to 80% of budgetary revenues (Index Mundi 2013). Unfortunately, the wealth has benefited the political class more than the people. Nigeria’s economy of oil gave rise to a rentier state in which the government became more and more dependent on oil revenues, and developed a crass sense of irresponsibility and unaccountability (Gboyega, Søreide, Le, and Shukla 2011). This natural resource is also a major driver of corruption in politics and in publicly owned establishments (Nwokeji 2007). To a great extent, the wealth derived from oil has fueled poverty among the population, and painfully so in the creeks of Niger-Delta, an oil-rich region where the most dehumanizing realities are commonplace (Obi 2009; 2010).

Meanwhile, local refineries have since failed to even produce enough refined oil for local consumption. The paradox of this condition is that citizens now depend on the vagaries of international markets to consume what they produce at affordable rates. Fuel subsidies were first introduced in the 1980s to cushion the effect of the high cost of refined crude in the global market. It was supposed to be a temporary policy but over the years, subsidies on petroleum products have become permanent, and an avenue to perpetrate a form of institutional corruption for which the oil industry is currently renowned. More significantly, however, is the fact that the subsidy on petroleum products had transformed from mere cautionary policy to a sort of social benefit; the most obvious social benefit enjoyed by the people from the government. As successive governments failed in their capacity to develop social and economic infrastructures and provide good leadership, people have grown apathetic, expecting little from political officeholders while finding respite in purchasing petroleum products at prices below international levels.

INTERNET, NEW MEDIA, AND NIGERIA'S RESURGENT PUBLIC SPHERE

The context of pervasive social and economic decline, and the attendant misalignment within the political realm, succeeded in destroying the public sphere of the Nigerian society. Over a period of five decades, the once vibrant public sphere was haunted by numerous corporal ghosts, but those of militarism and underdevelopment were most impactful. On the one hand, the public space that accommodated public discourse and that led to nationalist mobilization for freedom and national independence was effectively neutralised as governance became the domain of military dictators. Although labor unions and civil society organizations challenged military rulers and protested against “anti-people” policies, Aiyede (2003) notes that most of them either were too alienated from the state or tended to be too far removed from the grassroots where active citizenship ought to have been promoted. For him, military governments shaped civil society more than the latter shaped political events. On the other hand, an unending problem of policy somersault or what Akanle (2013) called “development exceptionality,” coupled with corruption, profligacy, and impunity among public officers, created a condition of apathy that de incentivized popular participation in political affairs.

While the return to democracy on the eve of the millennium opened up some space for public discourse to take off, the “real” transformation of the public sphere did not begin until more and more Nigerians ventured into the cyberspace. It should be noted that this process dates even further back than May 1999 when the military handed over power to civilians. In an

ethnographic study by Bastian (1999) and in a recent book by Everett (2009), Nigerians in the United States were reported to have been among the few earliest callers on the cyberspace among black communities, with strong online presence as early as the 1990s. Through discussion forums, information sharing, and publication and distribution of position papers, these cybercitizens of Nigeria helped stimulate a dying public sphere and provided the pillars that would later speed up citizens' recovery from the slumber of political disinterest.

The subsidy-removal struggle of January 2012 received a great boost from the recent increase in the number of Internet users and the changes that occurred in the telecoms sector. This transformation led to the rapid spread and adoption of new/social media tools and networking sites by Nigerians at home. From 2000 to 2008, Nigeria added 11 million new Internet users, representing close to 40% of total additions in sub-Saharan Africa at the time (Aihe 2010). While that number was estimated to represent a penetration rate of only 7.4% in 2009 (SPARC 2010), the figure had increased to over 48 million Internet users in June 2012, a penetration rate of 28.4% of the population (Internet World Stats 2013). This surge was due mostly to the deregulation of the telecoms sector from 2001, which not only increased the number of people with mobile phones but also made it cheaper for those using devices with minimal Internet capability to access the cyberspace.

Other important contributory factors in opening up the public space, as a result of the Internet revolution during the post-1999 years, include innovative use of simple mobile phone technology such as short messaging service (SMS) and picture and video apps, the influx of smartphones, and the popularity of social media and networking sites among Nigerians. All of these were of course interdependent in practice. Before the protest against subsidy removal in 2012, civil society groups, as well as low-scale, grassroots advocates and mobilizers, have explored the powers of SMS and social media sites during the general elections of 2011. Through mobile phones, Nigerian youths or "the thumb tribes" as Taiwo (2010) describes them, texted election results to friends as they were announced at the wards, and broadcasted same through the messaging platform of smartphones like Blackberry. Most of the results ended up on new media platforms such blog sites (Word Press and Blogger), social media sites (like Facebook and Twitter), and news-based sites like Osun Defender, Sahara Reporters, Nairaland, and so on.

Indeed, the ease with which citizens were able to access and share large volumes of information over the course of the election period, as well as the feeling of "we-made-it-happen" that became dominant in post-election discourse of the 2011 elections, were enough to revive the lethargic public sphere. Although politics of corruption and impunity remained rampant, and poverty was still on the rise, the awareness that political participation was yet

a possibility—and perhaps cheaper, easier, and less risky—reverberated in the consciousness of millions, especially among the younger generation who have become increasingly restless about the status quo.

THEORETICAL STATEMENT: THE NEW PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE PUBLICS OF INTEREST

The extent to which the Internet may be meaningfully described as a potential public sphere has been a subject of academic debate. Relying on Jürgen Habermas's influential book titled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), scholars engaged in the discussion with aims to identify and highlight the conditions and the set of attributes that can transform the cyberspace into a sphere of communicative discourse and deliberation. Properly defined, public sphere constitutes a space of action involving varieties of public sites where people come to deliberate on common concerns, evaluate competing proposals for change, and eventually arrive at a public opinion (Gripsrud, Moe, Molander, and Murdock 2010). Implicated in the idea of public sphere, according to Gripsrud, et al. (2010), is a notion of “public” that involves concrete physical space, as well as commonly shared and accessible informational and cultural resources; issues that are legitimated as governance concerns because of their intersection with interest common to all; a social category for collectives of citizens; and an aggregate of individual view which emerges as public opinion. As an action-oriented activity, opinions that emerge in the public sphere should normally shape politics and public policy in any democracy.

Against this background, Bohman (2010) highlighted some factors that must necessarily be present before a sphere is pronounced public:

First, a public sphere . . . must be a forum, that is, a social space in which speakers may express their views to others and who in turn respond to them and raise their own opinions and concerns . . . Second, [it] must manifest commitments to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction in the forum. [Also,] communication must address an indefinite audience. In this sense, any social exclusion undermines the existence of a public sphere (Bohman 2010, 249–50).

Scholars that are optimistic of the public sphere status of cyberspace argue that the Internet possesses these features and even more. As authors such as Di Maggio et al. (2001), Cohen (2007), Mayes (2009), and Bohman (2010) have tried to explain, optimists are generally of the opinion that features such as anonymity, inclusiveness, simplicity, relative cheapness, hyper-interactivity, speed, ease of role switching and taking by former audience,

many-to-many communication and so on all position the Internet as a credible sphere for public engagement and democratic deliberations, even though the interaction does not take place in the salons or coffee houses. In Mayes' view.

While Habermas spoke of public places such as the coffee house, he also conceived of a public space where debate occurred in which people abandoned their private interests and engaged with issues they considered to be in their collective interest. In the same way internet technology informs a sphere, a virtual space, imagined as egalitarian and theoretically accessible to all and sustained by anonymous expression (Mayes 2009, 94–95).

The dialogic character of cyberspace makes it an egalitarian space (Bohman 2010). It also appears that these reasons explain why contemporary social movements are increasingly converging around the Internet to construct and share imageries of a much freer world and also mobilize for it through the same means.

Nevertheless, some scholars warned that caution must be exercised in designating the Internet as public sphere. There are two broad interrelated strands of arguments to this call: the first set dealing with the theoretico-conceptual convergences and divergences that underlie the "idea of public sphere" as conceived by Habermas and the structure and infrastructure of the Internet; the second set of arguments raises substantive and pragmatic questions that seek to understand the limits and the real potentials of Internet as a sphere that can inform concrete social actions, and lead to societal change. The first set of arguments was engaged by Cohen (2007), Bohman (2010), and a few other scholars, and it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss them. Of more direct relevance to this work are the substantive issues.

Since the Internet has become so attractive to social movement, and considered by many (cyber)activists and "digital utopians" to have symbolic and practical relevance for bringing about social, economic, and political changes, the new public sphere of Internet and the associated new media forms have come under scrutiny. Aside from the obvious threats to participation in the cyberspace—linked mainly to the issues of digital divide, illiteracy, surveillance, and censorship—(Banda, Mudhai, and Tettey 2009) there are concerns about the ability of cyber-activists to translate online activism, and the mass mobilization achieved through the platform, into the kind of results that reflect their own aspirations and goals. From North Africa to Europe and America, activists that mobilized for occupation and mass protests cannot confidently claim that articulated values and visions are being seriously considered in the post-protest agenda of those in power. Apart from injuries caused to the vision of cyberactivists, and the political cynicism expressed toward their mobilization and tactics of occupation, the practicability of the prefigurative

world that discussants constructed via the Internet was often discursively downplayed and undermined by power brokers and institutional guardians who often accused them of too much utopia (Zuquete 2011). These power brokers are offline actors that benefit from the existing arrangement and must, as a matter of course, ensure that the status quo is defended at all cost.

Publics of interests such as the government, large businesses, organized unions, and other similarly patterned institutions continue to dominate offline affairs and structures. Also, the desire of cyberactivists to establish a free, autonomous, and “reality-altering” sphere on the Internet is still in one way or another connected to the preferences of these publics of interest. The emergence of the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt and the pursuit of a religionist agenda that contradicts the vision of democracy that protestors articulated is a case in point. What seems to be missing in the calculation of participants of the Internet public sphere is the neglect of the fact that cyberspace is, first and foremost, part of lived space (Cohen 2007). Normally, transformational strategies to be carved ought to be based on an awareness of the connections of online space to lived space.

FUEL-SUBSIDY REMOVAL AND OCCUPY NIGERIA PROTEST: PROCESSES AND ACTORS IN MEDIA(TED) “REVOLUTION”

On the first day of January 2012, the Nigerian government, through the Petroleum Products Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA), announced the removal of the subsidy on petroleum products. Prior to 2000 when the first pronouncement was made under a Fourth Republic civilian government, the subsidy on petroleum products has been removed more than eight times since 1978, mostly by military dictators. The first main hike in petroleum prices was in 1978, from 0.8k to 0.15k.¹ In the first decade after that, it went up by approximately 67% to 42k. By 1999, when the first democratic election was held since 1983,² petroleum was selling for ₦20, a 98% rise from the price in 1989. Prior to the recent subsidy removal, civilian government had increased the price of PMS (petroleum motor spirit) by another 69.2%, selling at ₦65 on the eve of 2012.

As such, the removal of the subsidy on fuel and other petroleum products is not new in Nigeria and to Nigerians. In fact, public discourse and official activities around subsidy removal or nonremoval intensified since structural adjustment became the economic order, used at different times as instruments of threat, resistance, or political legitimation rather than merely as tools for managing government deficit.³ The normal response of Nigerians to these changes was to resist by protesting or by embarking on strikes, often through the involvement and leadership of OLU, rights movements, civil society,

and advocacy groups. However, until the 2012 protest, only on one occasion did an anti-fuel subsidy removal campaign managed to last more than eight days. Previous petroleum-related struggles also suffered from poor coordination and were not as transethnic, interclassed, intergenerational, and transnational as the uprising that was triggered by the subsidy removal of January 1, 2012. A number of commentators believe that the protest of 2012 was the largest and most sustained short-term protest in any sub-Saharan African country in a long while (Jacobs 2013). The rest of this section describes the protest, its form, the actors involved, their methods, and the role played by social and new media tools over the course of the campaign.

OCCUPY NIGERIA MOBILIZERS AND ORGANIZED LABOR UNIONS IN THE SUBSIDY REMOVAL PROTEST

At the heart of the social protest that grounded national economic activities for more than two weeks in Nigeria, from January 2 to 16, were feelings of discontent with governance failures, institutional corruption, and the insensitivity of the political class to the poverty condition of the people. Expressing a motivation that captures the feeling of most young Nigerians, Japheth Omojuwa, the initiator of #OccupyNigeria hashtag on Twitter, stated that the protest was natural: “The time had come for the Nigerian government to realise and understand the country is not about ‘them’ alone but about ‘us.’”

Although many groups participated in the struggle, ON mobilizers and OLUs were most prominent. Among the first group were individual online and offline activists; civil society organizations working in the areas of governance, corruption, political integrity and so on; public figures, businesspeople, actors, musicians, and so on. What most of them had in common was that they subscribed to the idea of “occupy” while articulating their respective views on the rationale for the protest. The other group consists mainly of structured workers’ unions across different sectors of the Nigerian economy, represented by large umbrella bodies like the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC). NLC and TUC are the largest labor unions in Nigeria, and their members account for the highest number of workers in the formal economy. But in order to extend their outreach and influence in the larger society, both unions formed the Labor and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO), with the “radically ideologized” Joint Action Front (JAF) as its third member. JAF is made up of hundreds of small- to medium-scale civil society organizations across the country. As will be shown in subsequent sub-sections, this distinction is important for comprehending the processes involved in Nigeria’s subsidy protest of January 2012.

OCCUPY NIGERIA MOVEMENT VERSUS LABOR COALITION: CONTESTING THE PROTEST SPACE?

For the most part, individuals and groups that were not on the side of government worked together. However, the emergence of young activists that identified with the philosophy of global Occupy movement appeared to have posed some threats to the established order of protestation in Nigeria. Members of OLU tried frantically to dissociate themselves from the Occupy-movement, in a bid to mark territory and proclaim dominance over the Nigerian protest space. For example, in-depth analysis of JAF's blog at jointactionfront.blogspot.com showed that the group was very much interested in ensuring that people understand who controls or "owns" the protest. In describing the role played by the organization, a high-ranking executive was very direct and emphatic: that JAF was the initiator, organizer (with its labor partners—NLC and TUC)—mobilizer, and determinant of the nationwide protests. When probed further to describe what connections exist between JAF and ONM, he elaborates thus:

The issue to note is to have a conceptual clarification of the 2012 January uprising beyond the international profiling of what is called "occupy movement." . . . [W]hatever is meant by "occupy" should be contextually defined because the term "occupy" is an understatement of our continuous struggle of resistance for the socio-economic transformation of Nigeria.

Nigeria's realities are completely different from the western media profiling of the January uprising. *We maintain that the 2012 January uprising has a clear leadership and shouldn't be reduced to an abstract categorisation such as 'occupy.'*

Our protests - JAF and its Labor allies have always been Mass. *There was nothing different in the mass character of the Jan (sic) 2012 uprising than previous massive protests other than the international profiling and public expectations that it would have gone in the direction of so-called Arab Spring.*

. . . Nonetheless, we took note of massive participation in the January 2012 uprising by such groups as Save Nigeria Group (SNG) and others who categorised themselves as 'occupy movement' but it is not our business in JAF to determine what role any organisation plays in protest, what is primary to us is working with all groups that are agreed to our goals [emphasis added] (Executive Secretary/JAF/Online Interview/September 2013).

The new generation activists that promoted ONM, and that mobilized for and coordinated protest efforts through social media sites, announced their entry into the protest space of Nigeria by targeting younger citizens. ON organizers engaged this group and encouraged them to not only discuss issues but to also "occupy." This approach was significant, at least from the viewpoint of the fact that it permitted younger citizens to construct, through sustained

online discourse, narratives that rationalized and justified their involvement. Organized labor and traditional civil society groups have failed to provide this for a long time (Democratic Socialist Movement 2002). The facticity of shared sentiment and comparability of lived experience in the Nigerian state enhanced trust-building between ON mobilizers and youths all over the country. To an extent, most of the highly educated, upper middle-class citizens who had developed great cynicism towards organized unions were attracted by the strength of unity displayed by the youths.

The fact that ON mobilizers were as active and as crucial to the protest as "old" labor unions was demonstrated on the streets of major cities across the country. Contrary to the approach of the past, ON mobilizers focused less on moving from one point of the city to another. Following the method of the global Occupy movement, symbolic public places were occupied, including parks, expressways, and public office buildings. Occupy protestors also carved out temporary autonomous zones in some cities, particularly in Kano, Ibadan, and Abuja. Protestors held on to these spaces and used them as base stations for coordinating protest efforts. Government responded to these zones by imposing curfew (in Ibadan) and with direct violent attacks (in Abuja). At Eagle Square, a massive space at the centre of Abuja, hired thugs attacked and assaulted protestors in the middle of the night, all in the presence of the police.⁴

ON mobilizers were quicker responders, and their approach to protest is simple, yet effective. The new entrants acted more freely and spontaneously, unlike OLU who were constrained by size and structure, as well as their position in relation to the law. Why OLUs were determined to appropriate the protest space is still not clear; what is worthy of note in this article is that such dynamics manifested in the subsidy protest of January 2012.

ROLE OF NEW/SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media played an important role in the subsidy struggle of January 2012. However, it was not deployed by all the participants. For those that used social media platforms to enhance their activities, it was not employed equally, and the level of importance attached to it differed.⁵ Whereas OLUs used social media as "only a part of the tools . . . to enhance information dissemination to the general public," ON mobilizers were distinguished by the extent to which they exploited Internet sites such Twitter and Facebook. In addition to dissemination of up-to-the-minute information across multiple platforms, easy-to-know hashtags (e.g., #OccupyNigeria, #eyesAN-Dears) were created to facilitate discussion among protestors on the streets of various cities. In pre-protest periods, group e-mail was in constant use

and on different occasions, virtual meetings involving many people across multiple centers were also held. As one participant explained, social media: “helped to amplify our voices within and outside the country. Some 32 cities around the world joined in the movement and only social media could have helped with such a spread especially considering the time limits” (Omojuwa 2013).

Before January 1, 2012, when the announcement was made, government was supposed to be “consulting” with relevant stakeholders on the need to remove the subsidy. What the government had agreed to do was to hold off on any decision until April 2012, and many Nigerians had been led to believe it. As such, the decision by government to remove the petroleum subsidy on New Year’s Day caused an upset within ON camp. By also making that call at a period when many Nigerians have travelled to their hometowns and villages, government also gained the advantage of truncating the access of anti-subsidy removal mobilizers to their most important asset: the people.

ON activists had no plan to begin “occupation” in January, but when that became their only opportunity to resist, new/social media tools gave them the leverage they need to mobilize, plan, and coordinate across spaces. On January 2, ON activists were able to mobilize hundreds of people to appear at Eagle Square, Abuja. Although their intention was to get people together to sign petitions physically and compile volunteers lists, government saw the threat posed by their efficiency and responded by deploying security forces to teargas, harass, arrest, and disperse them. At this time, no concrete response to the subsidy removal had been announced by the largest organized labor unions in the country (NLC and TUC). Apart from the JAF that had organized some rallies at the southwest city of Ibadan, NLC and TUC did not mobilize until January 9, 2012. The swift response of ON mobilizers aligned closely with the flexibility that most Occupy protests were known for. Indeed, the ability to be spontaneous and mobilize under serious constraints had been observed to be one of the most important benefits that social media adds to the effectiveness of contemporary social movements (Petras 2011; Wilson 2012).

In addition, personal blog pages of ON organizers were used to engage members of the public who were yet to decide whether to join the protest or not. They educated would-be protestors on legal-rational rules guiding protest, as stated in the constitution and other codes, and advised them on ways to manage affairs at the home front while the protest lasted. Again, rather than wait for TV stations or newspaper reporters to come to them, ON activists packaged their own pictures, recorded short videos, and uploaded them on different websites for easy and fast consumption. Links to these materials were shared on social networking sites, microblog pages, and through instant messaging apps on smart phones, particularly Blackberry.

The important role played by Internet, as well as the associated new and social media tools, is also deducible from the transnational character of the protest. In London, New York, Washington, Brussels, and Toronto and in Switzerland, Australia, South Africa, and elsewhere, Nigerian diasporians protested economic policy at home and solidarized with their countrymen and country women in transnational space. With ease of access to information about events as they developed back home, Nigerian nationals abroad joined forces with fellow African diasporans and Occupy apologists in various cities to denounce what they called government's insensitivity and high-handedness, while also rallying international support for protestors. In Washington DC, public intellectuals such as Emira Wood of the Institute of Public Policy and Sameer Dossani of ActionAid marched across Macpherson Square to the White House before stopping at the World Bank to deliver the "We are 99%" speech. Demonstrators in New York also occupied public spaces at the United Nations. Transnational online news media like Sahara Reporters helped to broadcast up-to-the minute reports of happenings in Nigeria and in global cities elsewhere. Although many online news media covered the protest, Jacobs (2013) observes that Sahara Reporters had a much larger impact. By uploading pictures, articles, and in-depth analysis of the petroleum industry by experts on its website, Sahara Reporters provided a platform through which Nigerians from all over the world interfaced with events at home and transnationally voiced solidarity with their fellows.

POST-PROTEST DISCOURSE AND THE "BETRAYAL RHETORIC": WHEN ONLINE ACTIVISM MEETS OFFLINE POLITICS

The protest against subsidy removal started the next day after the announcement was made, but its impact and seriousness was not really felt by government until OLU's embarked on strike action on January 9, 2012. The emergence of NLC and TUC on the protest space gave the mass movement the boost it required to demonstrate people's resolve to resist what they tagged "antipeople policy." Their involvement also forced the House of Representatives out of recess to hold an emergency meeting on Sunday, January 8. The admiration of the strength of organized union as a powerful force transcended government circle to include ON mobilizers who admitted that NLC/TUC provided leadership and transformed the official attitude towards a protest that only a few political elites hitherto considered threatening at the initial stages. However, on January 15 when the strike was called off by NLC and TUC after a closed-door negotiation with the government, many had started to question the value of organized unions.

After the protest, “betrayal rhetoric” dominated public discourse because of the anti-climactic fashion with which the protest ended. Particularly, the role played by the organized labor union in its demise had been a subject of public debate and journalistic speculation. Because the protest was going so well on the streets, millions of Nigerians were hopeful that a new socio-political and economic order was possible. Most participants on the streets believed they were winning and assumed that government would have no choice than to reverse its decision after a few more days of strike and protest. Thus, the suspension of strike was, from the viewpoint of the people, needless at the time it happened. Describing how labor impacted the protest, one ON mobilizer stated that “They impacted it positively earlier on by ensuring workers joined the protests without the risks of being sacked and then they had an even more eventful impact by selling short to the government.” When probed to get his view on whether organized unions hijacked and sabotaged the protest, he responded as follows: “Hijacked? No. Sabotaged? Absolutely. It took the call-off of the nationwide strike earlier called by Organized Labor to quench the spread of the protests. Labor cost the protest potential victories by yielding ground too easily and too early.” Interestingly, JAF, a civil society coalition group that was in partnership with NLC and TUC, also issued a public statement formally dissociating itself from the decision. Part of the press statement reads

The Joint Action Front (JAF)—the pro-labor civil society partner of the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC) and Trade Union Congress (TUC) in the Labor and Civil Society Coalition (LASCO) and its allies . . . dissociate self from the declaration by the President of the NLC and TUC for the suspension of the Strike/Mass Action that commenced on January 9th as a joint initiative of the NLC, TUC and JAF . . . [We] strongly deplore the suspension of the Strike/Mass Action as endorsed by Presidents of NLC and rue as a betrayal of this legitimate demand by Nigerians that fuel price must revert to N65 as a condition for negotiation (Joint Action Front 2012).

Due to how NLC/TUC had handled subsidy matters in the past, the call-off did not surprise many people. In some quarters, such move was even expected. What most did not however anticipate was the impact the decision would have on the struggle in its entirety. The nationwide strike action that was called by organized labor unions did not start until January 9, more than seven days after ON mobilizers and civil society groups like Enough is Enough and Save Nigeria Group had stormed the streets with thousands of marchers and occupiers. In other words, organized labor unions (that is NLC and TUC) were not the initiators of the protest. Yet, at the point when they suspended the strike, it created the impression that the mass resistance had been suspended by all other actors, and effectively gave the government a

free hand to declare those found on the streets after January 15 as peace disturbers and law breakers. To a large extent, the agreement brokered between government and organized labor unions was also what gave the government the audacity to deploy soldiers to occupied sites and what permitted the authorities to apply open force on protestors from January 16.

In post-protest discourse, most analysis had bordered on finding out “what” motivated OLU to accept government’s proposal. To this, the possibility that government bribed union leaders was most speculated on, although reports of arm-twisting, national security concerns, and politicization of protest by opposition parties were not uncommon. In justifying the agreement, for instance, a labor leader said that the demand that President Goodluck Jonathan should step down was interpreted by government as a national security issue, stressing that “it was a misplaced assumption of concrete realities in Nigeria by local and international media in correlating the Ojota-Lagos mass gathering with the political power contestation in Tahir square Egypt. The leadership (NLC-TUC-JAF) of the protest movement was never agreed to unseat the neo-liberal puppet government in Nigeria. The general focus of the Protest was TOTAL REVERSAL of the price hike of petrol.” So when the interpretation was tabled during negotiation, unions had no other choice than to settle so as to protect the people from violent repression.

While the importance of the “what” question is not denied, a more pertinent question from the view of the author would have been to understand “why” it was possible for OLU to end a protest they never started.

Understanding the “why” question surely depends on several issues that may not be immediately obvious. Some of the issues may even need a much fuller, lengthy, and elaborate analysis, all of which the space available to us in the paper is not enough to accommodate. Nonetheless, I wish to point out quickly that a necessary part of the answers is the fact of the strong hold that organized labor unions had on the offline world. For the most part, online campaigning against subsidy removal and sustained construction of alternative courses of action through an Internet-mediated public sphere helped ON mobilizers to simulate the revolutionary capacity of the people. It also helped in no small measure to organize and eventually *get people on the street*. However, keeping them on the street was a task that depended more on offline activism and real-life politics.

The recognition of organized labor unions by law and the bureaucratized structure with which their activities were conducted positioned them far above Occupy mobilizers. As institutionalized bodies, they act and speak as though they represent every working person in the country, even though they had no jurisdiction over millions of workers in informal employment and countless other working persons in contract employ. Apparently, the government is familiar with this “representational impressionism” and subliminal

acceptance of same by majority of the population. As such, influencing or coaxing them into accepting a deal and causing them to suspend the strike seemed the surest way of making the mass feel that protest had ended, even though the struggle could have continued in spite of the strike call-off.

At a more pragmatic level, some of the ON activists that I conversed with mentioned that their lack of representation at the negotiating table was a critical factor in the anticlimactic end to the protest.⁵ The offline politics of space closure to noninstitutionalized “bodies” that were produced via communicative discourse on the Internet public sphere was apparently meant to limit the influence of online influencers to the cyberspace. While cyber activists and unions depended on each other to articulate a vision of dissent that will force the government to take positive action, the failure of the former to perceive the counterrevolutionary potentials of the latter prove they were too inexperienced to battle offline as much as they did online. Also, the extension of social capital, created on the cyberspace by online actors, to offline organized unions without cautiousness also shows the naiveté running through the system of occupiers.

CONCLUSION

When the fuel subsidy removal struggle was brought to an end in the most anti-climactic fashion by organized labor unions, participants have been taking time to reflect on what occurred and why things turned out the way they did. Of even greater concern was how to respond to questions about how to properly place the outcome of the protest in terms of success or failure. For a good number of ON collaborators, the protest of January 2012 cannot be boxed in one to the exclusion of the other; focusing on outcome alone, without looking at the processes involved and the symbolic relevance of popular uprising, underplays the significance of the collective action. As one mobilizer observed,

A point was made by the protests . . . that essentially showed the Nigerian government the capabilities of the Nigerian people. Many had said such would never happen in Nigeria but it did happen. That has been a disincentive for some other sinister ideas the government would have unleashed on the people even after that period but for the understanding that they could start a fresh movement that may be hard to stop considering the protesters would have learned not to depend on labor (ON Mobilizer/Online Interview/September 2012).

⁵From the viewpoint of ON activists, the act of “statement making” is in itself revolutionary, at least in the context of Nigeria where governance failures and widespread impunity among public officeholders had repressed

the civil society to perpetual passivity. Occupiers comprehend their success within a broader frame of resurgence of alternative *cybersphere* and the possibilities it holds for influencing or shaping politics in the traditional public sphere. While admitting that failures resulted from the spontaneity of the protest, which affected their level of organization, occupiers see that the rebirth of civil society and public participation were significant and worth celebrating.

In conclusion, it must be mentioned that there are aspects of the processes teased out in the article that need to be subjected to more in-depth analysis in future research. For example, more detailed study is required to fully understand why organized unions would be interested in appropriating the protest space for themselves. The tension that will result from this would surely impact the relationship between established mobilizers and the newly emerging cyberactivists, and impact how much they will be able to collaborate in the future. Other research questions may be asked: How can the friction between online activists and organized labor unions be straightened out? What factors will contribute to success? And as new media tools continue to penetrate the population, and opening up the cyberspace to people through social media and networking sites, what can we expect the Nigerian protest space to look like in the future? What possibilities exist in this space for promoting public welfare and good governance?

NOTES

1. Currency units of Nigeria are naira (₦) and kobo (k). 100k equals ₦1.
2. Note that an election was held in June 1993 but was annulled by the then military ruler Ibrahim Babangida.
3. As instrument of threat, General Ibrahim Babangida used “subsidy removal talk” to chide interborder smugglers of petroleum products and employed it frequently in growth and national development discourse (Nwosu, 1996). His successor, General Sanni Abacha, stalled many times in deciding whether to jerk up petroleum prices or not and even reinstated a substantial portion of the domestic fuel subsidy within a few days of taking over power as a show of resistance toward the neoliberal policies of the West (Lewis, 1994). During the Fourth Republic, an upward review of subsidy by Olusegun Obasanjo a few days before leaving office in 2007 was reversed by his replacement, Umar Musa Yar’Adua, as a strategy to legitimize an election that was widely claimed to have been fraudulent.
4. See “Attack on #occupyNigeria Abuja Protesters” at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVT710C2Mgw>. Last accessed on September 13, 2013. “On the 4th Day of #OccupyNigeria, the Police came to Attack Innocents” at <http://azeenarh.wordpress.com/2012/01/09/on-the-3rd-day-of-occupynigeria-the-police-came-to-attack-innocents/>. Last accessed June 13, 2013.

5. An executive member of JAF said the following about the role of social media: “beyond a wider and quick access to information, social media, in the context of the January uprising wasn’t the driving force nor constitute the empowerment basis of the critical mass in Nigeria. The critical factor was organisation and the willingness of Nigerians who participated actively on the basis of their resolve to say ‘enough was enough’.”

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