

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Communication Technologies and Glocalized Identities

Onuora Nwuneli, Ph.D.

7th Annual Conference of Association of Communication Scholars
and Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN) in Collaboration with
UNESCO, IFAD & COMEST

THEME:

Communicating Identities and Nationhood:
The Media, the Government and the People

A Virtual Conference 2nd – 3rd

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

Communication Technologies and Glocalised Identities

Onuora Nwuneli, Ph.D.

In the 1960s into the 1970s we witnessed the emergence of the concept of the global village advocated by Marshall McLuhan the Canadian philosopher and media theorist (McLuhan, 1964). He theorized the interconnectedness of people of the world, urban and rural, interacting in a common communication or media sphere or interface.

When the topic of global village was taught then in schools of Journalism Students were left to image what the world would look like where instead of a trip to the post office to send mail an electronic post office—the email would be embedded in one’s laptop. Laptops were not even in existence then.

A world where the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964);

A world of information or communication super highway (Besser, 1995);

A world in which the new media became dominant (Manovich, 2003);

A world where traditional journalism and the concept of gatekeeping in news rooms would give way to social media and citizen styled- journalism without gatekeepers (Bowman, and Willis, 2003);

A world where anyone and everyone is a potential journalist and participant in information gathering and sharing in an interactive environment, fact checked or not;

A world in which producers and consumers of news and information is now interchangeable;

And a world of the Internet, the connecting core or driver of the concept of the global village.

As we are all aware the Internet is home to many platforms. Among them include:

Internet based search engines such as google and cultural content-based platforms such as YouTube. However, of significant interest to our discourse here are the new media platforms especially the social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram among others. The social media platforms are more relevant to the topic of this discourse since it seeks to examine more closely what the organizers of this conference identified as:

“Communication Technologies and Glocalised Identities” within the context of the Media, the Government and the People.

Communication technologies here is visualized as the utilization of technologies such as computers, laptops and smartphones including various internet platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram and Skype among others for generation and sharing of information. Similarly, we view the concept of glocalized identities within the purview of local actors generating, disseminating, consuming and sharing of information within the framework of globalization and the concept of global village.

The concept of Glocalization was coined in the Harvard Business Review in 1980 by sociologist Roland Robertson who wrote that glocalization meant “the simultaneity or copresence of both universality and particularizing tendencies in regard to particular product or service”. The produce or service in this instant is information generation and sharing through the use of communication technologies by local identities within the architecture of globalization. We therefore intend to approach this discourse, utilizing a few examples from an on-going Nigerian case study (Nwuneli, 2020). These are the role of government, the local person and the media in glocalization of information.

GOVERNMENT INTERPLAY

Today it is normal within the Federal Government of Nigeria and the other thirty-six State governments to appoint teams of Special Assistants on Social Media Affairs. They are seen as Social Media Warriors—the government attack dogs. These social media warriors generally pretend to walk the thin line. However, many of them have a loud mouth, lie through their teeth and

spin the facts with doctored images to their hearts content. Some of them are now even trained in the utilization of artificial intelligence resources to manipulate political information.

The social media warriors are tasked with monitoring social media platforms for any information that is inconsistent with their respective state government policies and thought processes. They then produce appropriate rebuttals which are upload with or without video images, not fact checked, onto targeted social media platforms. The goal is to inflict maximum negative damage on the image of any opposing party.

Citable examples are replete however for avoidance of libel issues we could only speak in generalities. A good example is the case of a high- flying political figure who was accused of corrupt practices and mismanagement of his state's commonwealth. He was finally convicted and sentenced to jail (YouTube: Channel TV News 2019). The social media warriors immediately uploaded onto social media platforms video clips of the politician kneeling down in a prayer mode as if he was pleading for leniency from some powerful political power brokers to help let him of the hook. The video clip went viral. A later video clip produced by sympathizers to counter the earlier one showed that the politician was actually knelling down in his garden praying with a priest who had come to conduct a service for him. This sort of doctoring of video images for Nigeria social media audiences is common place especially during Gubernatorial and Presidential election circles.

This type of resources and tools were only available to the intelligence communities of major world powers during the cold war era. This has all changed now, with the emergence of the Internet and the new media. During the cold war era and beyond, the first world powers utilized propaganda and disinformation to influence targeted political leadership, governments and people in different parts of the world.

Misinformation and disinformation today in the mainstream media seem to be used interchangeably. However, both concepts are not one and the same. Misinformation as a concept is a communicative act without a hiding intention at deception in the transfer of information from one person to the other. On the other hand, Disinformation (Martin, J. 1982; Martin J Manning & Romerstein, H. 2004), is anchored in deception. It is generally defined as the

intentional use of information based on forgeries, half-truths and outright lies to influence opinions, local, national and international policies of targeted nations. It is a war of words and manipulation of one nation and its citizens against another.

Since the Internet and the New Media were non-existent during the cold war era and slightly beyond, the main vehicle of delivery of information and/or disinformation and propaganda were the mainstream traditional media of newspapers, magazines, radio stations and sometimes academic journals. Similarly, international academic and professional conferences were occasional partially funded via cutouts such as NGOs and Foundations to influence emerging acceptable ideas in the international professional public sphere.

It was common those days to plant stories in national and local newspapers with real names of journalists or fake names depending on the situation. These initiatives and activities were done discreetly to minimize detection. These world powers utilized this strategy to propel propaganda and disinformation to influence political leadership and governments in different parts of the world. However, this has all changed now with the emergence of the Internet, the new media and the concept of globalization.

Disinformation has now been relabeled as fake news and has become a global village affair mainly through the social media platforms. International cable news network made their debut on the scene and carried along the glocalized ethnic communities in diaspora as instant gatherers, consumers and sharing of home and related news stories even in their local languages. The disseminated news stories may be real or fake and most consumers can hardly tell the difference. With that transition, governments, political actors and individuals at all levels, urban and rural, from developed and developing nations, became fair targets of various information and disinformation campaigns.

While the mainstream or traditional media has a choke hold on information and news story collection and dissemination, the opposite is the case with the social media. The mainstream media with its gatekeeping mechanisms publishes and broadcasts only what they feel is in good taste and good for its audiences. On the other hand, the beauty of the social media in this continuum

is the interactive environment it provides participants—journalists and non-journalists alike. However, while some of these social media interactions are positive others leave much to be desired probably due to the non-existence of gatekeepers. While trained journalists manned the online news outlets and management of news websites. The non- and semi-trained journalists—the citizen journalists also known as gorilla, democratic and participatory journalists became producers of internet platform based hard and soft news outside established traditional sources.

With that transition, governments, political parties and individuals at all levels, urban and rural, from developed and developing nations, became fair targets of various information and disinformation campaigns. While trained journalists manned the online news outlets and management of news websites. The non or semi trained journalists, gorilla and citizen journalists and other interested individuals became producers of internet platform based hard and soft news and information outside the mainstream or traditional media.

THE LOCAL PERSON'S INPUT

The entry of affordable mobile smartphone technology, within the reach of the globalized identities, put into the hands of the common person, the power and ability, to collect and upload information, about oneself and the community even in local languages onto the social media platforms. Up loadable generated information content and interactions may among others include:

COMMUNITY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

It is almost common place today for internet savvy younger Nigerian generations to open, operate and live very active virtual lives on Facebook and WhatsApp platforms. These youths raise issues of existential concerns and sometimes mundane human-interest issues using smartphone technologies to mobilize their citizens/colleagues locally and globally. They not only post but also share, forward and interact with each other across continents on issues and challenges across platforms and group specific political and socio-cultural forums.

For example, significant issues of concerns in Nigeria presently include

1. The possible trashing of the Nigerian 1999 constitution and replacing it with what “We the People” would prefer with participatory inputs from various global villagers or glocalized communities;
2. The possible emancipation or balkanization of present Nigeria nation into various ethnic nations;
3. The vexing issues related to the violent encounters between Fulani herdsmen and farmers.

PERSUASIVE MESSAGES ON ADHERENCE TO COVID-19 PROTOCOLS

Nigeria’s main persuasive messaging elements of adherence to COVID-19 protocols could be said to be at variance to some of the Nigeria’s socio-cultural behavioral norms. This is especially so in relation to burial ceremonies, traditional marital rites and obedience to social distancing in a culture used to cue jumping and speaking into each other’s faces. That notwithstanding the social media was effectively utilized in pushing the COVID-19 protocols. It is however interesting to note that while many Internet hooked educated Nigerian white collar workers and students seem to have obeyed to some extent the said protocols as found in the social media, the reverse could be said to be the case for both the urban and rural low income and poor citizens of the nation. The reason for this is not yet clear.

Agricultural information about internal and international resources for improved farming;

Violent invasion of remote farming communities by herdsmen are also captured in real time via mobile smartphone videos and uploaded to various forums for local, national and international audiences. It could thus be argued that while the mainstream traditional media do not provide the breath of openness for interactions with readers and audiences due to the inherent gatekeeping processes and the learned schools of Journalism formation culture of what is news; what gets into a lead and what is fit to print or broadcast culture embedded in the mainstream media, the social media propelled by modern technologies provided the space to do what the mainstream media could not and would not do.

WhatsApp platform for example enabled the formation of discussion and chat groups with capacity to forward and share information across forums all over the world—a real global village leading to the formation of glocalized

identities sharing similar experiences regardless of cultural imperatives. Thus, the coming into being of the WhatsApp platform fully transformed the ordinary rural community person with little or no training in news dissemination into a very active gorilla or participatory journalist.

The Nigerian government has made unsuccessful attempts so far to legislate against upload, forwarding and sharing of negative opinion of government on social media and failed (Senate Federal Republic of Nigeria: Anti -Social Media Bill, 5 Nov. 2019; Paul, Techpoint 28 Nov. 2019; Onukwue, Techcabal, 9th March 2020). It has also made public announcements that the government is monitoring the content of social media in Nigeria and anyone found who shares or forward unverified negative information about government may be arrested. That notwithstanding the forwarding and sharing of information continues unabated.

LOCAL COMMUNITY LEVEL INPUT

Recently the *Ndieche* (the council of elders) in a small agrarian community in Anambra states Nigeria, after listening to various reports of how younger community members upload negative comments about the community on social media, pronounced that:

- Its citizens resident at home or in diaspora are no longer allowed to upload negative information about the community on to the social media;
- They are no longer allowed to utilize the social media especially the Facebook and WhatsApp platforms to fight each other and other members of the community;
- Any member of the community who does not give the community first chance to resolve offensive issues and challenges would be sanctioned;
- The elders further announced that any report that a member of the said community engaged in such activities would be fined a sum of Forty thousand Naira or the equivalent of one hundred US dollars.

THE MEDIA INTERPLAY

Trending recently is the politicized encounter between some Anambra State Traditional Rulers and the Government of the State. The involved Traditional Rulers were seduced with thousands of Naira by a local wealthy businessman

with an axe to grind to travel with him to visit the presidency in Abuja, the nation's capital to laundry their grievances against the state government.

While the Traditional Rulers were still on their way to Abuja, the local citizen or gorilla journalists, broke the story on WhatsApp platform, with live video images of the traditional rulers who were openly counting and pocketing those thousands of Naira. Within hours of the event the video clips were in the smartphones of almost everyone in the state and outside.

The story was of intense political and human-interest value. It was like being offered an American KFC chicken, garnished with Hausa kilishi spicing. Almost everyone including traders, market women, taxi drivers, rural farmers, undergraduates, Nigerians and non-Nigerians in diaspora were viewing and commenting on WhatsApp.

The mainstream traditional news media did not catch up with the story until State House Abuja released information that the presidency would not meet with the Traditional Rulers and their facilitator (Guardian newspaper, Nigeria 14 August 2020). The story above and others discussed earlier beautifully encapsulates the impact of new technologies on news and information flow and glocalized identities within the Nigeria's case study. The exposure of a local political power game captured by local embedded citizen journalist in real time propelling a local corruption news story into the national and global sphere. This could be said to be the extent and impact of modern communication technologies, in the shaping of glocalized identities, mediated information and nationhood in Nigeria.

References

Besser, Howard. (1995). "The Information Super Highway: Social and Cultural Impact." In Brook, James & Ian Boal (eds.) *Resisting the Virtual Life: The Culture and Politics of Information*. San Francisco, City Lights Press.

Bowman, S. and Willis, C. (2003). "We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information." *The Media Center at the American Press Institute*.

Manovich, Lev. (2003) "New Media from Borges to HTML". *The New Media Reader*. (Eds.). Noah Wardrip-Fruin & Nick Montfort. Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 13–25. ISBN 0-262-23227-8

Martin, John. (1982). "Disinformation: An Instrumentality in the Propaganda Arsenal." *Political Communication*. Vol.2:1. Pp. 47-64.

Martin, J. Manning & Herbert Romerstein (2004), "Disinformation", *Historical Dictionary of American Propaganda*, Greenwood, pp. 82–83, ISBN 978-0-313-29605-5

McLuhan, Marshall. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Mentor, New York.

Nwuneli, Onuora. (2020). *The Impact of Smartphones in the Formation of WhatsApp Forums and Chat Groups for Sharing of Information About Self, Community and Nation: A Nigeria Case Study*. (Research in Progress).

Nzeagwu, Uzoma and Osibe, Osiberoha. (14 August 2020). "Obiano Suspends 12 Monarchs over Abuja Trip." *Guardian Newspaper, Nigeria*.

Onukwue, A. (9th March 2020). "Nigeria's Social Media Bill Suffers its Biggest Defeat Yet." *Techcabal* <https://techcabal.com/2020/03/09/social-media-bill-public-hearing/> Retrieved 30th September, 2020. **Editors note:** *Alex Onukwue reported from Nigeria's National Assembly in the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. This story was written with logistical and funding support from the Paradigm Initiative.*

Robertson, Roland. (1980). "Understanding Glocalization". *Harvard Business Review*

Senate Federal Republic of Nigeria: (5 Nov. 2019). *Anti -Social Media Bill*

Techpoint: Paul, Emmanuel. (28 Nov. 2019). "Everything You Need to Know About Nigeria's Social Media Bill and What You Can Do About It." <https://techpoint.africa/2019/11/28/nigerias-social-media-bill/> Retrieved 30th September, 2020.

YouTube-Channels Television (Dec. 5, 2019). "Court Sentences Orji Kalu to 12 Years in Jail."

