FACEBOOK AND DIGITAL ACTIVISM: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PEACE BUILDING IN NIGERIA BETWEEN A PRESIDENT AND HIS “FRIENDS” ON FACEBOOK

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Abstract
This study analyzed conversations between President Goodluck Jonathan and his Facebook ‘friends’ about security problems in Nigeria. Specifically, the paper examined how social media, particularly Facebook, is providing a platform for Nigerians to speak about governance and leadership in the country. The method is a textual analysis of user comments on the President’s Facebook Page in response to his post about security challenges in Nigeria posed by terrorist activities of Boko Haram, an Islamic fundamentalist group. The paper also examined how comments of the President’s Facebook “friends” reflect the current political and economic situation in the country. The comments, analyzed through the prism of the encoding and decoding model, provides a framework for understanding the impact of the internet and computer-mediated communication on free speech and civic participation in Nigeria. Findings of the study reveal that anonymity on the Web is emboldening Nigerians to demand for transparency from their leaders.

Keywords: Textual analysis, Terrorism, Political Conversation, Facebook, Nigeria

Introduction
New social technology is not only revolutionizing the way Nigerians interact with each other, it is increasingly making it easier for them to maintain contacts, and build new relationships. Facebook is specifically changing the way Nigerians are discussing issues that affect them. Even though the Nigerian constitution allows for free speech and expression, the situation in the country is not about freedom of speech, it is rather an issue where freedom after the speech is not guaranteed as both the media and people in the country are still constrained when it comes to expressing their views about governance and leadership in the country (Spiegel, 2011; Okonkwo, 2012; Adepegba, 2012).

Ranked number two after Google, Facebook, with more than 800 million active users, (Facebook Press Room, 2012) is popular among Nigerians, with the number of users rising from 400,000 in 2008 to 4.3 million in 2012 (Elebeke, 2012). Tapping into the viability of Facebook as a political communication tool, President Goodluck Jonathan opened a Facebook account in 2011 to discuss his “transformation agenda” and after his reelection, issues of governance about government policies. The friendly exchange and interaction between the President and his Facebook “friends” has however taken a different dimension, with the President’s Facebook page becoming a forum for dissention by his ‘friends’ and other Nigerians protesting against the current security situation in the country.

Enraged by terrorist activities in the country, especially, a 2011 Christmas day attack on Christians at a church in Madalla, the bombing of the UN building in Abuja and terrorist attacks in Kano State by Boko Haram, an Islamic fundamentalist group in the country, President Goodluck Jonathan’s Facebook ‘friends’ expressed displeasure about the security situation in the country and his administration’s policies for addressing the problem. Taiwo (2012) described President Goodluck Jonathan as the most cursed president on Facebook. Even though he enjoyed a lot of support from his “friends,” his handling of the security problems seems to have changed their perception about him (Taiwo, 2012; Ikem, 2012; Egbunike, 2012; Okonkwo, 2012).
This paper therefore examined how Nigerians are, through these Facebook posts, raising fundamental issues about the terrorist activities of Boko Haram and the President’s policies for addressing the problem. Their interaction on Facebook is important for understanding how the social networking site is changing the way Nigerians are discussing issues that affect them. This study therefore provides a framework for understanding the impact of the internet and computer-mediated communication on free speech and civic participation in Nigeria. The paper is divided into four sections: the first part is a review of literature related to this study; the second and third parts cover the theoretical framework and methods; while part four presents findings and the conclusion.

**Facebook and Political Communication: Review of Related Literature**

Several studies identify social networking sites as creating new opportunities and platforms for political expression and participation (Youn, 2003; Di Gennaro & Dulton, 2007; Madore, 2009; Coleman and Wright, 2008; Coleman and Moss, 2008; Kennedy, 2008; Emruli, Zelneci & Agai, 2011). Social networking sites like Facebook enable politicians to reach and interact with thousands of people outside their geographic locations, more than they could achieve using traditional methods (Youn, 2003, Madore, 2009). Even though activities on Facebook center mostly on social interaction between users, their friends, and acquaintances, the network site is increasingly becoming a tool for political communication (Westling, 2007; Williams & Gullati, 2009; Espina-Letargo, 2010; Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison & Lampe, 2009). The interactivity taking place on this social network allows political leaders and government officials to account for their stewardship. It also gives people, an opportunity to contribute to political discourse, through the feedback they give on policy and issues of governance (Westling, 2007, Erikson, 2008, Karlson, 2011, Espina-Letargo, 2010). This form of mediated communication enhances public participation on political issues in an unedited and uncensored manner (Sundar, Kalyanaraman & Brown, 2003). Facebook plays a role in complementing and supplementing “existing real-world communities, real-world political issues, and real-world news stories” (Westling, 2007, p. 4) in the United States and countries like Macedonia (Emruli, Zelneci, & Agai, 2011), Korea (Park, Lim, Sams, Nam & Park, 2010), the Philippines (Espina-Letargo, 2010) and the United Kingdom (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2006).

The situation in Africa presents a unique perspective. In spite of inadequate internet and computer technology infrastructure, Africa is experiencing monumental growth in the number of social media users. Blackberry phones and other internet enabled mobile devices are providing alternative internet access for millions of people in countries like Nigeria (Bohler-Muller & Merwe; 2011, Nurudeen, 2012). A 2011 World Internet Statistics report shows the number of Facebook users in Nigeria has increased from about 400,000 in 2008 to over 4.3 million users by December, 2011. Information sharing among the Facebook users is changing the dynamics of information sourcing and dissemination and challenging the dominant roles of government-owned traditional media outlets in monopolizing information dissemination (Vlam, 2012). Increasing security challenges in the country, particularly, terrorist activities of an Islamic fundamental group, Boko Haram are triggering new conversations about the future of Nigeria (Guardian, 2011).

In spite of the opportunities that Facebook provides for political communication, there are questions about the effectiveness of the social network as a tool for political mobilization (Woolley, Limperos & Oliver, 2010). There is also a question about citizen participation in civic activities offline. While some studies (Tian, 2006; Westling, 2007; Espina-Letargo, 2010) suggest a positive correlation between the political engagement of internet users and increasing traditional political participation, others (Sundar, Kalyanaraman & Brown, 2003; Papacharissi, 2004; Vitak, et al, 2011) argue that even when political groups mobilize Facebook users to support political causes online, very few of them engage in political activities offline. Other studies (Sweester & Weaver- Lariscy, 2008; Westling, 2007; Wright, 2008; Vitak, et al, 2011) raise questions about the characteristics of audiences, their demographic representation, the nature of the content, and whether or not the politicians read the posts or manage the Facebook pages themselves.

Although these questions raise important issues about the effectiveness of Facebook as a political communication tool, Facebook provides Nigerians some form of anonymity that allows them to share their views without intimidation; it is site where “lone individuals and colossal powers interact” (Mayer, 2009, p.58) in Nigeria.
This paper therefore analyzed Facebook posts by “friends” of President Goodluck Jonathan in response to his comments about *Boko Haram*. Specifically, the paper examined what their comments reveal about the attitudes of Nigerians towards the security problems, as well as existing political, economic and power structures in the country.

**Theoretical Framework: Encoding and Decoding.**

Stuart Halls’ encoding and decoding model, which provides the framework for this paper, is important for understanding audience interaction with the sender of a message and with the message itself. The model emerged as a response to the traditional communication research which viewed the sender, message and receiver model of communication as being very “linear” in its interpretation of communication and for being a “mere circulation circuit” (Hall, 1980, p. 128). The encoding and decoding process begins with the producers (encoders) framing the message, while the readers (decoders) receive and interpret the meaning through interpretative frames they draw from their personal, cultural or social background (Gurevitch, Scannell, & Paddy, 2003; Aguayo, 2009). While the reader’s interaction with a text is active, the exchange is meaningful when the message is correctly decoded and produces the intended response from the reader because “meaning structures of the broadcaster cannot always be equated with the “meaning structures” of the audience” (Hall, 1980, p. 131).

Hall (2012) identified three hypothetical positions through which meaning may be constructed by readers. The first position is: the dominant-hegemonic position where the audience is seen as accepting the connoted meaning in a message the way it is presented and decode it within a framework of the dominant code or ideology. Second is the negotiated position in which the audiences understand dominant connotations in a text, and accept or reject some aspects of codes, which sometimes hegemonic definitions of “national interest or geopolitical views.” The third position is the oppositional code. Here the audiences understand both the “literal and connotative inflection of a given discourse” but decode it in a contrary way (p. 144). To identity the hypothetical reading positions of the encoding and decoding model, the paper examined the different reading positions of users who responded to the President’s Facebook posts on the security situation in Nigeria. This paper also analyzed how their articulation of the security situation in Nigeria is reflected in the reading positions they take and, how these interpretations raise key issues in the national discourse in Nigeria.

**Method of Data Collection**

The paper is a textual analysis of user comments on the Facebook page of Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan. Textual analysis as a data gathering process allows researchers to gather information about how people make sense of the world. As a method, it provides a framework for understanding the ways through, which people from various cultures and subcultures make sense of their identities and their relationships with the world and their environment (McKee, 2003).

The paper analyzed comments of users on his Facebook posts. The study employed purposive sampling “based on predetermined criteria” (Piwoz, 2004, p. 8); the data was compiled from the personal Facebook page of President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria. A search using the name, “Goodluck Jonathan” on the search window of Facebook came up with 88 Facebook pages with the same name. The page set up by the President’s office, through, which he communicates with users about government policies was selected. It is important to make this distinction because even though there are several pages set up by the president’s supporters, only the page set up by his office had 678,829 likes and contained posts from the President about government policies. Only the comments posted in response to President Goodluck Jonathan’s comment on Jan. 23, 2012 about *Boko Haram* terrorist attack. The first 500 comments of users who responded to the President’s post comments were coded and analyzed.

**Data Analysis.**

Analysis of the texts involved very careful and reading of the Facebook posts and identifying aspects the Facebook posts that reflected different reading positions. Each re-reading of the text “is an attempt to listen for echoes of something that might expand possibilities of understanding. This is distinct from a search for themes, which is generally validated by the reemergence and repetition of specific ideas (Moule,
2002, p.29). Atlas.ti qualitative data management and analysis software was used to manage data. Meaning in the posts was generated using both inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding began with close readings of text and consideration of several meanings within the text. The codes were tagged into meaningful categories that emerged from the data. Deductive codes were created based on the theoretical framework of the study, which will allow for identifying of reading positions of the users.

Findings.
Two reading positions of Facebook users were identified from their responses to the President’s post about security problems in Nigeria. First, comments of a majority of President Jonathan’s “friends” reflected a more oppositional code positioning in their response to his Facebook posts. Even though their comments show that they understood both the literal and connotative meaning of the President’s post, they read it differently. For example, while the President’s post focused on the security problems in Nigeria, the user’s oppositional comments responded by pointing to what they viewed as the President’s bad leadership skills, poverty, corruption, economic marginalization and lack of transparency among political leaders. For example, majority of users blame corrupt policies and the corruption of political leaders in Nigeria as being largely responsible for the activities of Boko Haram in the country.

For example, one user said:

More than any religious ideological radicalism, nothing is more profoundly powerful and compellingly inciting terrorism as poverty and destitution. Poverty has one of the fiercest inciting powers that can propel destitute young people, like Boko Haram members, who have nothing to lose, and thus being used to murder innocent Nigerians. Poverty breeds rebellion, and rebellion breeds terrorism.

Another comment reads:

Am not surprised, you are supposed to be giving a speech and you kept the nation waiting for a speech that'll never come yet you and your script writers have time to come on FB and spread BULLSHIT."

Yet another user expressed disappointment at the President’s inability to tackle the problem, blaming the security problem on his bad leadership; he said:

Shame, shame, shame! You are intellectually bankrupt; you lack any real political intellect.

A large number of the posts tell the story of corruption and economic inequality in Nigeria. In response to this issue, some posts read:

“If you Mr. President can use 1 billion naira (about USD 6m) to feed your family for year, that amount can feed 2,336 families a year. What sacrifice u asking of us?”

“@GEJ: “I wish to remind you that the masses are part of the government too. You first tackle problems b4 imposing a burden on the common man, start by reducing the cost of governance (that's where you waste our money)

@GEJ: “how on earth will leader of suffering masses have 22 cars maintained with public funds? Who feeds with 3million a day, even if he feeds on elephant daily? When last did you pay for your own meals? When last did you buy fuel with the colossal salary and allowances? You were voted there to do our bidding but now you are power drunk…You guys have been robbing Peter to pay Paul. We are totally disappointed in you!”

More than any other issue raised by the “friends” of President Goodluck Jonathan on his Facebook page, comments about his leadership ability was a major theme. One of his ‘friends’ began his comment with:

“Letter to Emperor Goodluck Jonathan” and another, “The man has lied to us. He has put down policies to further pauperize us. There is no longer an illusion of who the president is. Instead of authority, he wields power. In place of constitution, he imposes impunity.”

Other posts referred to him as:
useless man” “you are a total disappointment” “hmm, you are a fool, a big fool.”

@GEJ shame, shame, shame! You are intellectually bankrupt; you lack any real political intellect”

For others, their disappointment in the President also implies “unfriending” him on Facebook. For example, two posts read:

@GEJ, “I will unlike this page because I'm disappointed you in… Any reasonable person should unlike this page” @GEJ, “I am so disappointed in you Jona, that from today, I have decided to unfriend you!”

The President’s Facebook “friends” who took a dominant code position acknowledged the security challenges in the country and commended the President for his policy of addressing the problem. In their comments, they reechoed the government’s arguments about underlying political reasons for the existence of Boko Haram. For example, one comment reads:

“Mr. President. I commend u 4 your wisdom on this Boko Haram criminal acts. Enough is enough. How can a minor bad group of people try to put a country of population of 16m into trouble? Sir, it is high time to rescue this matter to avoid 2nd civil war. This is political & ethnicity.

Some of them commended him for good leadership:

“My president, don’t listen to some illiterates that are calling u names, they are ignorance, carry go no shaking u are our messiah.”

“Our God sent President, continue trying. Real human beings know that you are moving towards the right direction. God Almighty will see us through.”

“Mr. President bad belle people will not allow you to do your work. Boko Haram is not our problem. It is the fault of your political opponents who do not want to see a South-South man become president. They will fail in Jesus name!”

**Discussion.**

The findings of this paper reflect the views of Facebook users about the security problem in Nigeria. Even though the comments were a response to his Facebook post about security, President Jonathan’s “friends” spoke about broader problems in the country. The posts also reflect the frustrations of the people about the corruption in the system; corruption among political leaders entrusted with power and responsibility. The comments about existing structure, power and economic imbalance between the rich and the poor in Nigeria and corruption, one of the major issues fuelling Boko Haram activities, reflects their oppositional reading of the President’s post. Even though majority of the Facebook comments reflected this position, others took a more dominant approach in their support for the President and the current administration in the country. For example, comments about corruption among political leaders and economic inequality between the rich and the poor, reflects the working-class dichotomous perception of the social structure, which seems to have emerged as an opposing situation that categorizes people in the country as “us and them.”

"Them,” the “rich and any other persons perceived by them as constituting moral danger (Labinjoh, 1982. p. 130). Comments like “this oppression has gone on for too long. It’s time to stand up for our rights,” point to perceived feeling of oppression among the poor in society. The implication is no doubt income disparity between the rich and poor, economic policies that favor the rich and by extension, increases poverty among generality of the citizens. For example, the percentage of Nigerians living below the poverty line, who barely can afford bare essentials of food, shelter and clothing has increased from 54.7 percent in 2004 to 60.9 percent in 2010 (Brock, 2012).

Perhaps more than any other thing, existing structural imbalance between the rich and the poor in Nigeria can be linked closely to the problem of endemic corruption, which has permeated all strata of society and has adversely affected development and economic growth in the country. In spite of efforts to curb corruption through the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and other similar agencies, Nigeria
remains high on the corruption ranking table. The Global Integrity Report reveals that the integrity indicator for Nigeria reflects a weak overall global rating of 60 percent. Brock (2012) explains that the gap between the rich and the poor in Nigeria continues to grow because of the corruption of politicians in the country who, rather than cater for the needs of the people have continued to “milk cash” from the over 2 million barrels a day of crude oil export of crude oil. For example, even though the National Assembly passed the Freedom of Information Bill last year, the bill was first presented to the National Assembly in 1999. Olukoya (2011) argued that it took so because political and public office holders in the country are holding on to documents in the country that could implicate them for corruption. The emergence of Boko Haram in the country is also linked to poverty and corruption among Nigerian leaders. Central Bank Governor, Sanusi Lamido explained that there is a direct relationship between the increasing violence of Boko Haram and the uneven distribution of national resources between the northern and southern parts of the country (Eyieyien, 2012). These issues remain at the core of national discourse in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Even though the oppositional and dominant code reading positions were reflected in the posts of users on the Facebook page of President Goodluck Jonathan; the negotiated code position proposed by Hall is not easily identifiable within the text. This to an extent validates the argument by Pillali (1992) about limitations in Hall’s idea of “negotiated readings.” The different readings are in a way negotiated by the readers and their negotiation of this reading enabled them to take either of the two decoding positions reflected in the Facebook posts. The internet and mediated communication can make it difficult to identify the negotiating process. This challenges the negotiated reading position arguments of the encoding and decoding model.

However, the conversation on Facebook between users and with President Goodluck Jonathan, points to the important role the social networking site is playing in empowering Nigerians to speaking to the problems of corruption and bad leadership in the country. Even though the goal of these conversations might not have been geared towards activism, issues raised by “friends” of President Jonathan, draw attention to the viability of social media as platform for mass mobilization and collective action. This trend provides a framework for further research on the impact of the internet and computer-mediated communication on free speech and civic participation in Nigeria and other developing countries.

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