


Interrogating Social Negotiations Within Online Discussion Platforms in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

One of the dividends of internet revolution in Africa relates to the privilege it accords all and sundry to access news online and share their views with the online community through online discussion platforms. However, the kind of heated discussions emanating from these platforms recently is becoming an issue of concern. Abusive language and arguments revolving around religion, politics, and ethnical sentiments appear to pervade most online commentaries. This article assesses online discussion platforms in Nigeria, its contributions to the society and its setbacks; further, it critically explores the connection between discussion platforms and violence. The article concludes with some recommendations on how Nigeria can further use the platforms for its benefit.

KEYWORDS

Discussion Threads, Internet, Nigeria, Online, Violence

INTRODUCTION

The main thrust of this article is to examine the social dynamics of online discussion vituperations among the users of online newspaper comment boards. A discussion around this phenomenon becomes important considering the outbursts in the use of social media within the country and elsewhere; as at 2013, studies pointed out that internet users in Nigeria increased to about 50 million users out of which 75 percent were social media users, and as at 2018, it has increased rapidly such that the country is ranked second after South Africa in terms of internet penetration (Internet World Stats, 2012; The Vanguard, 2018). One of the benefits internet connectivity has brought to mass media is that it affords the readers the opportunity to provide feedback on issues of interest irrespective of space and race. National dailies in Nigeria have keyed into this innovation as they have the online news version. The depth of discussions and information flowing from this news thread have equally become a useful tool for journalists in enriching their story lines or publishing new stories (Gunn and McDonald, 2011). For the readers, the comment threads are assets; it affords community of readers with same or dissenting views to express themselves freely on issues of interest. Consequently, one of means through which news readers express their opinions regarding ongoing debates or headlines in the national or local dailies in recent times is through the online discussion platforms. Within these platforms, interesting issues and debates around news captions are discussed while other topical issues

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within the country and elsewhere are equally discussed. These platforms unlike the traditional face to face interaction provide the commentators an opportunity to hide their identities (if they so wish) and expressly share their views with the online community. This development has strengthened news production and consumption; equally, it has further entrenched freedom of speech and opinions as engrained in the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria.

A large number of online readers have become regular, active, opinionated and able to express themselves without fear on the comment threads across online news platforms. Cliques have been formed, opposition groups and trolls have equally emerged. Summarily, comments thread within national dailies have become a community with varying interests and needs. This development comes with its benefits and fears. Stakeholders and the general public have expressed satisfaction regarding the development in terms of providing the readers opportunity to express their views freely on issues affecting the society; others are equally beginning to express their fears regarding the negative implications of these virtual activities on the real life issues. Ignoring these developments and assumptions may be difficult considering series of events from this space. Also, the past experiences of social media and violence in recent times coupled with emerging studies connecting virtual actions with real life experience further becomes interesting. (Africa Practice, 2014). Unpacking these realities through a critical discussion of the activities surrounding these spaces thus becomes necessary. Accordingly, the questions one needs to ask are: what are the opportunities inherent in online discussion platforms? What have been the challenges? How can discussion platforms and social media generally be further utilized for the overall benefit of the users and the society as a whole? This article takes a critical look at the social interactions among the users of online newspaper comment boards in Nigeria. This article is significant in a number of ways; first, through its critical analysis of online discussions platforms, it brings to the fore the socio-political dynamics surrounding arguments and engagement of readers regarding national news in the country. Comments on the national dailies are not merely about discussions about national and local events as captured in the dailies; they are a reflection of economic, ethnic, religious and other social standpoints of the readers. Not much has been heard regarding the social engagements of online readers from this part of the globe. Aside this, the discourse brings to the fore the dynamics of group formation, alliances, conflict and its resolutions across these platforms; it further x-rays the probability of physical violence as a result of disagreements across these discussion platforms. Further, this discourse is important as it will lend its voice on the global debates on online discussion from Nigerian perspective. Studies on online discussion platforms in Nigeria is emerging; this study contributes to the emerging literature on the subject. Finally, the significance of the article also lies in its multi-disciplinary nature which cuts across the disciplines of sociology, politics, media studies and humanities.

ONLINE DISCUSSION PLATFORMS

Group debates around topical news items are not new in Nigeria. Traditionally, before the advent of online news, interested newspapers readers in Nigeria congregated at newspaper stands across neighbourhoods and strategic places to quickly scan through the headlines of major national dailies before picking a copy and later move on with their respective daily routines. These set of people were given a special name often referred to as Free Readers Association¹. The introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 80s, and other economic policies to tackle the economic challenges in the country coupled with the reaction of the populace to these policies further strengthened these quasi groups. Consequently, concerned readers would gather around newspaper stands and discuss about politics, the biting economic challenges together with other matters of interest for the day. Eventually, a few of such readers would grab some copies of the dailies and move on. However, 'free readers' association' as it was fondly called then, became widespread after the annulment of 1993 June 12 elections. Teeming unemployed young school leavers and other interested individuals mostly male gender thronged these venues to listen to arguments and debates for the day. With the

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