

Chapter 10

Using Social Media to Advocate LGBT Rights in Black Africa: A Study of Nigerian and Cameroonian Gay Bloggers and “Facebookers”

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of draconian homophobic laws in Cameroon and Nigeria has systematically stultified sympathy for the LGBT communities and made pro-gay street activism a risky venture in these two countries. In view of this, a good number of gay rights activists have resorted to the social media as a suitable platform for a less risky advocacy. Using the social media has afforded them the opportunity to explore interactive, post-modern, and personified approaches to sensitizing and mobilizing their readership in favour of gay proselytism in Cameroon, Nigeria, and some other parts of Africa. Based on a content analysis of 200 blog posts and web/facebook pages generated by Cameroonian and Nigerian gay activists, this chapter measures the extent to which gay activists adopt a national/local perspective versus the level to which they adopt an international perspective in their online advocacy. The chapter equally examines the degree to which these citizen journalist/activists construct their advocacy discourse from the prism of a cultural war between the West and Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Apart from South Africa, virtually all Black African countries have adopted draconian legislations which severely criminalise homosexuality and systematically discourage any form of sympathy for the LGBT people. Being mainly inspired by doctrinaire religions and other conservative/fundamentalist social arbiters, these legislations have not only instituted a homophobic atmosphere at all spheres of most African societies, but have equally attempted to literally stultify any form of advocacy for LGBT rights in

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these Black African nations. The homophobic legislations and atmosphere have engendered a situation where in pro-gay and human rights activists face constant death threats, intimidation, humiliation and physical elimination by anti-gay thugs and conservative arbiters. In countries like Nigeria, Mauritania, Senegal, Uganda and Cameroon (just to name a few), legal dispositions have even been taken to systematically neutralise media advocacy in favour of the LGBT rights movement (Egbert, 2013; Endong, 2015a; Karaim, 2011; Pen American Centre, 2015). Media regulatory organs have thus, in their codes, prescribed heavy penalties to be meted on “rebellious” media outlets that will dare celebrate and push a concept which, according to popular imaginations is just a symbol of Western cultural corruption, a vector of “*westoxification*”, thus a socio-cultural pathology. In its chapter 3 devoted to program standards, the *Nigerian Broadcasting Code* (2010) for instance, provides a set of principles to clarify media professionals on morality and decency. It states that “sex-related acts such as adultery, prostitution, rape, bestiality, homosexuality, lesbianism, incest, etc, which are considered bad, shall not be presented, except as destructive practices to be avoided or denounced” (Article 3.7.5.). In many other African countries, such homophobic media codes guide all media operations, particularly in government owned media outlets (Endong & Vareba, 2015; Karaim, 2011).

It goes without saying that the (anti-gay) legislations and media codes adopted by most African countries actually violate a multitude of civil rights. They breed a climate of socio-political intimidation and fear which is immensely un-friendly to media advocacy and activism for LGBT rights. These legislations and media codes equally threaten self-expression by LGBT people and their allies; and systematically hinder the expression of support for LGBT human rights. Furthermore, the anti-LGBT legislations indirectly affect African peoples’ literary, artistic, and cultural communities as they put LGBT and pro-gay writers and artists at risk of criminal prosecution and violent physical attacks, as well as limit their ability to publish and distribute their works in the homophobic African countries. Additionally, the anti-gay legislations directly threaten freedom of expression thereby eroding the strength of African democracies.

In view of all these indexes, the act by an African, of publicly supporting the LGBT right movement has, in most Black African countries, been a matter of being a courageous, off rooted and pertinacious advocate/activist. Meanwhile, putting up a stiff, rigid and uncompromising demonization of the LGBT people and wanton stigmatisation, blackmailing, seclusion and lynching of gays have been the rule, if not a range of patriotic prerogatives for all. As most political leaders and Africanist ideologues quasi unanimously echoed, homosexuality is purely “un-African”, thus a bane to the authentic African social system.

Despite this asphyxiating homophobia and the strong stultification of media advocacy for the LGBT rights movement in African communities, (pro-)gay entities and other LGBT people have designed a variety of tactics to resist the “violation” of their freedom of expression, freedom of thought and freedom to protest. Some have used media productions, in the forms of documentaries, religious teachings and books to “clandestinely” and daringly raise awareness on the plight of homosexuals in Black African communities. With the help of both endogenous and exogenous civil society organisations, some have created programmes and schemes aimed at making journalists more sensitive to LGBT rights in their reporting of news events. The greatest media communication technique adopted by this strand of LGBT advocates has, perhaps, been guerrilla communication tactics centred on citizen journalism/online journalism. This citizen journalism has mostly been through blogging, tweeting and “facebooking” which offer them (the [pro-]gay activists) serious interactive options and alternative means to canvass support for pro-gay proselytism not only from their immediate geographical communities but from a transnational pool of online commenters and sympathisers.

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