Law, Social Justice & Global Development

Digital Media Activism and Nigeria's Public Sphere

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper offers an empirical and theoretical overview of the uses of digital media in the development of a national public sphere. It attends to several aspects of the classical Habermasian concept of the public sphere, as well as the cooption of those aspects as features of more recent formulations of a 'digital public sphere'. While this article maintains a certain scepticism with regard the political agency afforded by the use of digital media in a national public sphere, it also expresses optimism in the way that young entrepreneurs in contemporary Nigeria have been able to marshal digital media as a means of generating intellectual debate and accessible information -- on matters central to the kind of deliberations required for a substantive public sphere to emerge. The article thus explores current changes facing the Nigerian political system, locating the place of an emerging digital public sphere within it. The second half of the article accounts for the the evolution of digital media in Nigeria: who is using what platforms and for what purposes? It offer an overview of three case studies, demonstrating how information and communication technologies are being applied by way of demanding openness and transparency from government and public officials, as well as spurring political consciousness from one active citizen to the other. The article concludes with a discussion, largely derived from interviews with other active members of the putative, emerging, Nigerian digital public sphere.

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Introduction

In 2013, the United Nations embarked on a crowdsourcing exercise to develop the next generation of anti-poverty goals. They employed digital media and mobile phone technologies to create an inclusive communication environment for people all over the world to have a say in shaping the new global development agenda. The web platforms for this global conversation were "The World We Want 2015" website, Short Message Service (SMS), and Interactive Voice Response (IVR). In Uganda, through a free SMS-based citizen reporting system, the UN was able to aggregate the views of over seventeen thousand young people on what the development priorities in their respective communities should be (Kjovern, 2013). This global conversation, enabled by digital media technologies, has led the United Nations to this conclusion: "people want to be a part of delivering this new agenda, and to hold governments and businesses accountable for their promises and commitments" UNDP, 2015).

The fast adoption of digital media in Africa (largely, it must be said, mobile phone telephony) delivers for the UN a ready-made platform for the advancement of the Post-2015 agenda. Where people seek to hold their governments accountable for their promises and commitments, digital media has so far been instrumental in meeting these needs (or appearing to meet them) through diverse group initiatives and individual innovative projects. In this article, I explore the idea of digital media activism in Africa (specifically, Nigeria) using three case studies, where through active digital media participation, interaction, and a display of democratic culture, the government is being held to account by a burgeoning public sphere that requests it 'legitimates' itself before the people. The aim of this paper is to examine the idea of social change via digital media in Nigeria, Africa, from the communication platforms employed, to the local-centric techniques and strategies discharged in meeting civic activism goals.

Digital media and public sphere theory

The 'public sphere' is a strong theoretical concept, famously set out by German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1962), and subject to revision and critique ever since. It essentially refers to the realm of interaction and communication where citizens deliberate and articulate their views on matters regarding political decision making or considered to be in "public" interest. How this happens, who populates, controls or dominates this 'sphere' (or indeed whether a unified or single or dominant sphere exists at all) is a matter of constant scholarly debate. The issues of concern in our context are not so much the classical matters that are associated with the relationship between the state and civil society, law, order, security, or internal issues regarding procedures in the administration the country. They concern the way that digital media technologies have very rapidly and effectively opened a space we can credibly refer to as a 'digital public sphere'.

Moreover, one of the features of this new public sphere is activism – its dynamism, lack of established protocols, fluidity, routine anonymity, rapid response mechanisms and mass mobilisation impacts, have generated unique opportunities. Of course, scholarly debate remains on the definition of 'activist' and, as Bobel (2007) argues, there is a lacunae between "doing activism" and "being activist". Many actors within new social movements reject the label "social activist", as indeed older concepts of citizenship have become outmoded given the social complexity and diversity of contemporary society. However, as contemporary forms of social protests continue to draw on more easily accessible new media technologies in the communication and amplification of "movement messages/agenda", we can expect a clear-cut identification of the social activist, as much as the occasion of their activism.

Habermas' original perceptions of the historical public sphere was arguably more abstract than empirical, and grounded on historical notions of collective representation as political communication, rather than actual institutions, organisations or related administration. Similarly, the manner of public sphere that is emerging on digital media platforms, can only be defined as a 'space' of representation that is formed through acts of dynamic communication. It is structurally expansive, and constituted by multiple and hybrid flows of communicative interaction (cf. Castles, 2008). In other words, it features social forces that do not make for the standard processes of institutionalisation. Although, of course, socio-physical institutional spaces such as coffee houses and salons were, for Habermas, inextricably bound up with the historical evolution of the public sphere

in Europe, (and the machine of the printing press played a crucial role is facilitating the articulation, amplification and dissemination of deliberations that took place in this public realm), we cannot find a parallel, stable, mechanical infrastructure or apparatus for the digital public sphere. We cannot, as the media infrastructures and 'machines' (or today, 'devices') are multi-purpose, improvised, globally mobile, intangible, of dispersed ownership and administrative control, only partially subject to political jurisdictions, and so on. I will not labour this argument here, as the purposes of this paper lie elsewhere.

The public sphere has, in part, migrated to a multiplicity of platforms, and as Castells points out as a general principle, the contemporary public sphere involves avenues removed from any physical location; it is increasingly global both in its frame of references and values (2008: 79-80). The rise of radio and television, old media, impacted the public sphere, but has now been subject to what Bolter and Grusin (1999) term 'remediation'. This remediation does not simply make sense of the introduction of new media technologies and devices, but also the impact their arrival has on existing media technologies. As they point out, new media, the Internet and the diverse nature of digital media, are not exclusive from 'old' media, but rather, they embody and articulate the function of these old media, while extending that function into regions of society and culture that old media was once absent, or socially had not yet emerged.

The interpenetration of digital media into 'everyday life' makes older scholarly proclamations on the democratising effect of national television, or the reversal of the democratising effect of television by international media corporations and business elites, and the dissolution of the public sphere, all seem quaint. The brave new world of digital media has opened up a 'local-global' synergy, where personal ejaculations can now find a global audience in a way that directly pertains to the formation of social movements (cf. the work of Douglas Kellner). The expansion of the idea of the public sphere to embrace digital media technologies attempts to take this into account. Through digital media, new forms of public communication (where 'forms' also entail scale, reach and impact) are emerging, where remediation ensures that this is not some niche area or social trend that might disappear as fast as it appeared. Even 'traditional' national newspapers

now use internet platforms (websites, blogs, social network sites) to ensure their very survival; the very future of old media (of media at all) rests with the new digital media.

Understanding Nigeria's political system

According to the Federal Constitution, Nigeria functions as a democracy. And yet this ideal as is found in many nations, and often only partially manifest in practice. That Nigeria operates as a democracy presupposes the adherence to basic tenets and conditions of democracy that are relatively unanimous in scholarly discourse. They are the tenets of representation, participation, and popular inclusivity, which yield fully informed citizens, who are enabled to contribute to decision-making by the State, regarding their social, cultural, and economic life. These tenets are thus grounded in communication media, alternative spaces for interaction, and the role of the state in ascribing legitimacy to the citizen. Democracy comes with the freedom to express oneself, human participation and rights are guaranteed, and the rule of law is not subverted on any account.

Nigeria as a political entity was created in 1914, when the British colonialists merged the Northern and Southern protectorates. Prior to this development, the regions that make up Nigeria were autonomous in their ruling of one another (Falola & Heaton, 2008: 7). Hence, when Nigeria gained independence from Britain in 1960, the regional arrangement of the Eastern, Western, and Northern region prevailed, albeit that they functioned under one government. Subsequently post-independence, there were coups, a civil war, and the consolidation of a military system of government for most of the 1980s and 1990s. Democracy became reinstated in the country in 1999, when the military finally handed over power to the civilians. To date, there has been no return to the oppressive military system of government. This is the socio-political history that has shaped the character of Nigeria's current political climate.

In practice, Larry Diamond (2013), suggests that Nigeria's political system is best described as an "hybrid" form of democracy, given how its elections are sometimes fraught by corruption. And yet, the State identified with democratic ideals and there is a certain measure of freedom available to civil society.

There remains, as Diamond points out, a certain level of civil pluralism which in turn allows for some degree of representativeness. In this paper, I use the term 'democracy' in relation to Nigeria as a form of political 'culture', as distinct from the firmly established models and practices of government one finds in Europe, for example. Democratic *culture* refers not to systems or structures, but to the dynamics of values, practices, and behaviours through which abstract democratic tenets are wilfully expressed by both the people and their representatives.

Evolution of the digital public sphere in Nigeria

In the classical conception of Habermas' public sphere, *culture* is a significant aspect of society. Culture is a means of provisional solidarity and collective allegiance through values and beliefs concerning the nature of solidarity and collective allegiance and the individual benefits of such. The dynamic of social interaction that generates this provisional collectivity is *communication*. Communication is the animating form of agency that makes a public sphere possible. Here I submit that digital media has become a significant factor in the culture of democracy in Nigeria, and is facilitating the evolution of a new public sphere.

The rise in the adoption of new media technologies – even just the pervasive use of cell phone handsets and the various functionalities they provide – has generated new forms of communication and interaction in Nigerian society. Thus, the potential for solidarity and collective allegiance on matters of public interest, is effectively increased. This new 'culture' of communication, articulates certain democratic traits, for example, the rise of 'special interest communities' that might have otherwise found no means of social interconnection. More so, individual social and professional identities are being consolidated on these platforms, mass trends on discussion topics are formed, an awareness of current affairs and international events is being fostered, thus we find the embryonic conditions (in the form of creative behaviours and communicative responses) of a public sphere as an apprehension of the current state of national democracy.

The use of digital media technologies as political communication – official, governmental – is not new, as the world can witness with US President Barack Obama's own Twitter page, askobama.twitter.com. In Uganda, according to The Collaboration on International ICT Policy in East and Southern Africa (CIPESA, 2012), information and communication technologies have been instrumental to fostering government transparency and accountability, as well as increase citizen participation. Email usage, social network sites, eForums, eNewsletters, discussion groups and SMS campaigns are some of the ICT tools identified in this CIPESA study, albeit that traditional media platforms of radio, print, and television remained significantly present in citizens' engagement with media tools.

In Nigeria, information and communication technologies (particularly requiring internet access) is an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon, which make up only sixteen per cent (16%) of the country (Open Society, 2012: 6). According to Internet World Stats (2015), internet users in Nigeria, as at June 2014, exceeded a total of seventy million people (out of a population of 177, 155, 754). This put the penetration per population at 39.7% and in Africa, 23.6%. Mobile chat apps are found to be popular in Nigeria no doubt because they are more adaptable where poor information and communication infrastructure prevail (Africa Practice, 2014). Mobile chat apps for instance, cost significantly less than SMS, yet fulfil the same function of communicating by text messages (Africa Practice, 2014: 6).

In 1996, the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), Nigeria's telecoms regulator, approved licences for Internet service providers to operate nationally. Linkserve was one of the pioneering internet service companies in the country (Vanguard, 2010), providing dial-up Internet connections for offices and households, albeit not cheap. Preceding powerful internet access that the influx of mobile telephony, which could probably be dated from 2000-1. Prior to this, the provision of phone lines fell under the ambit of the state-owned Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL) and a few other private operators (Obadare, 2006: 97). "A decree regulating the activities of the GSM companies was promulgated as far back as 1992", says Obadare (2006: 97), and yet, the policy was not implemented under the then Head of State, General Babangida, nor his predecessor. In 2001, however, "the federal government threw open the auctioning process for four mobile licences in January 2001" (Obadare, 2006: 100) and within a few months, the companies that gained licences had "exceeded their

highest expectation" with the adoption rates. According to live data available on the NCC website, as at August 2015, there were a total of one hundred and forty-eight million, seven hundred and three thousand, one hundred and sixty (148, 703, 160) active GSM lines in Nigeria.

Since the rapid influx of mobile and digital media into Nigerian society, new possibilities have emerged for the mobilisation of public opinion, the dissemination of public information, and the creation of new forms of political scrutiny: new modes of good governance and means of stimulating a culture of democracy have emerged. Where a classical public sphere is represented by debates and deliberations (defined by the strength of their content, not the social, economic, or political rank of the citizen participant), public debate in Nigeria is complex. Even low-level public discussion on everyday issues can become fraught with ethnic strife and overwhelming religious influence, for instance. When these challenges are set against the backdrop of Nigeria's colonial and military history and an unstable political system, the notion of an effective public sphere – where public debates and deliberations maintain a direct claim on political and governmental debates and deliberations – Nigerian democracy is complicated.

The 'pre-digital media' public sphere in Nigeria, as Europe, tended to function as facilitated by opinion articles and 'letters-to-the-editor' published in print newspapers, in tandem with the programming of state regulated broadcast media. The pace of debate was slower, which allowed debates and their topics to be formed within a national hierarchy of issues, monitored and shaped by state or government interjection, and managed by the controllers of the media, who in turn were sensitive if not under orders from state diktat. However, the hybrid character of contemporary digital media now supports a matrix of often simultaneous communications – horizontal communication from citizen to citizen and vertical from the governed to the government, and where each line of communication can cross in multiple ways. The topics, or subjects of debate, can appear and disappear rapidly, and state intervention or the contribution from a government official can generate opposition and anger, not compliance and order. The hierarchies of public issue tend to be determined by intensity and density of communication activity, not by significant representatives or the airtime of an important broadcast channel. Through blogging,

tweeting and 'Facebooking', to mention a few, Nigerian citizens have been able to generate content for public debate and insert topics into the public arena that would previously been subject to censorship or media controlled access barriers. Moreover, this in turn has meant that Nigerian citizens can now engender an involvement in social and political activism, where before such a role would be necessarily 'physical' (actual participation in a protest, for example) and often dangerous. The 'costs' of participation and influence in the digital public sphere have dropped significantly, and so have the entry barriers.

By way of overview, here below are some of my main observations, following field research, representing the way digital media is being used as a form of social and political activism – and this, I would argue in a broader study, is stimulating culture of democracy in Nigeria. In other words, digital media is generating conditions for the cultivation of democratic values and behaviours - democracy is being developed through spontaneous activism and digital participation and not by the standard procedures of state regulation or systemic state reform. It is a democratisation 'from below' – *bottom-up democratisation*.

- Immediate attention is drawn to inconsistencies in government policy; for example, *Occupy Nigeria* and the policy on fuel subsidy.
- Public officials responsible for particular public policies are being openly identified, and targeted publicly with petitions and questions.
- Government is continually goaded or beckoned to set up a formal and systematic account of its actions.
- Channels of communication on social or health issues have been diversified – allowing for a more effective targeting of needy or special interest groups.
- The cost of information – whether for personal retail expenses or for journalists doing research on political issues – drops significantly and the availability of factual data is more immediate allowing for more accurate reporting and rapid response of the agents of public scrutiny.

From this, I will cite three case studies by way of exemplifying some of these changes. The initiatives selected for this study are the *Nigerian Constitution for Blackberry app*, *Egunje.info*. and *BudgIT*. My interviewees are anonymised.

Case 1: **Nigerian Constitution for Blackberry**

Proponents of promoting democracy through internet usage have always celebrated its potential – to promote the spread of information, to stimulate active citizenship and participation, to increasing ones awareness of rights to freedom of expression and public opinions, to allow ease of access to the marginalised and disabled, and so on. The internet has opened up realms of possibility for the public realm, social movements and the expansion of political representation. The Nigerian Constitution for Blackberry is an 'app' – a small-scale independent software application – which as an information technology tool exemplifies this potential.

The app has simply condensed the Nigerian Constitution into a mobile-friendly format, whereby users may utilise the search function to access sections of the constitution that may be relevant to them at any point in time. During a research interview, Z & B [interviewees] highlighted that the download rate of the app (which they made freely available) began to increase towards the 2011 national presidential election. Another period that experiencing a spike in the download of the app was the Occupy Nigeria protest – a movement that stood against government's removal of the fuel subsidy, at the same time decrying the state of corruption in public offices.

Z & B convey how they created the Nigerian Constitution app out of a "gut-feelings" that Nigerians would need it. They say they felt people should be more curious and aware of their rights, in order to exercise them. In their words, the app "…got people for some reason to be more patriotic and say, you know, maybe I should actually know my rights - let me go download the constitution." Z & B have created the Blackberry equivalent of the app for other devices such as Nokia and Samsung. The app is useful in that, rather than having to go through the entire constitution for a specific term, that information is more accessible to you through the search feature. Z & B say that the app is a "very simple application", but it's one limitation is that "Even for people who are educated or enlightened,

interpretation is still subject to having some sort of legal background." The limitation has to do with the content of the constitution not the app itself. Hence, although the constitution may well be on every citizens' mobile phone, there remain barriers to accessing its content or message. Z & B also point out the barrier of literacy and language. As at the interview date, they explained that they were seeking to update the app to feature local languages, as well as English language. Even then, Z & B expected that the complexity of legal language would be a challenge to the translation process.

Case 2: **Egunje.info**

Egunje Info is the initiative of another interviewee, S.A. Published on the Egunje.info (2014) website, it identifies itself in terms of an "anti-corruption, research and advocacy organisation with the vision of reducing the tolerance to corruption in Nigeria". Hence, through egunje.info, S.A uses research to engage in "constructive dialogue with the government, even during the military [rule]". Egunje is a Nigerian colloquial term for 'bribe'. In terms of application of digital media tools, S.A says the idea behind his initiative is to take the message about corruption from "Blackberry to Blackberry". In introducing his initiative, S.A says, "we've created a site where you can report corruption safely and we would pass on the details to the ICPC, if you are scared…" The ICPC is the corruption monitoring body in Nigeria.

The functionality of the Egunje.Info site is compatible the Blackberry and non-smart phones (feature phones) through SMS (short message service). The Symbian version is available for download; hence, it is accessible to those connected to the Internet and otherwise. S.A says users can "report [cases of corruption] from your phone", or alternatively, walk into their offices to report a case of corruption. The SMS function is easy to use says S.A, "you just have to say the name of the institution or type of complaint upfront, and then free text." S.A and his team then work with the call centre to "make sense of the SMS" and update their data base. Alternatively, people call in to their Egunje office to report cases, which they then also update on their records.

S.A explains that the reason why most people prefer to make phone calls rather than register their complaint on the website, is because "there is still

the fear of retribution." He explains that people are unsure as to whether "they can be traced", hence, they prefer to call in or report. Based on Google Analytics, a web tool that generates detailed statistics on a website's traffic, S.A says the majority of the visitors have been "the more affluent in the society." In his words, "they've been coming [to the site] on Apple, Blackberries and so on. But the people who have been reporting are not the people who can afford Blackberries." This led him to the conclusion that his organisation reaches two separate audiences – "those who are checking 'I hope my name is not there yet' and, those who are reporting 'this is what is affecting my life' says S.A. This corruption monitoring website has been a victim of hackers who tried to breach S.A's security "a few times."

Case 3: **BudgIT**

BudgIt is a creative enterprise dedicated to re-presenting the Nigerian national government budget and consequent public finances data in more accessible everyday language – for "every literary span", according to the website. The tagline for this organisation is *The Nigerian budget made simple – using creative technology to intersect civic engagement and institutional reform*. BudgIT seeks to enable every Nigerian citizen an immediate access to national budget data and direct ancillary issues, implications, calculations and any other relevant public data. In a research interview with the founder, S.O., he opines that the general public literacy level in Nigerian society is a barrier to understanding the budget, hence, "a lot of people are making misjudgements", and "saying wrong things". This, of course, is heavily compounded by a lack of public dissemination of budget data on behalf of the government and its financial agencies, and so BudgIT acts as a social activism of public information – ensuring that accurate, digested and undigested, information on government spending and budgetary diktat is filtered through to the growing digital public sphere. For S.O., BudgIT centrally aims to present data and so empower the citizen with data – and so "driving institutional reform" through making that data the content of national debate. S.O clarifies that, 'If people don't understand these things so how do you simplify it, how do you make it of common understanding, how do you take it from that niche knowledge of the public finance expert and economists, to something that is of common understanding to all?"

BudgIT's strategy is *simplification*, and they achieve this through the use of info graphics, interactive applications, prints (leaflets etc.), radio broadcast, SMS and "as many tools as could connect to that literacy set of society". By "set", S.O explains that BudgIT users are identified by category, such as "actively literate set" and "grassroots set". He says the active literate set is the target group for BudgIT at the time of interview, and these, he asserts, "are mostly on social media, Facebook, Twitter…[and] strictly interested in [issues pertaining to] governance." S.O is very conscious of BudgIT's role in Nigeria's embryonic digital public sphere, and uses the language of "digital activism'; and yet, "the governance discussion [on social media] is an high-octane one, so we want to be just like the neutral voice in the room." BudgIT's activism is not inflammatory, and not actually politically partisan in its messaging content: while he admits to challenging the government and demanding accountability and transparency, he is not doing so through direct "political" opposition. S.O. deals in factual data – it is information activism. Without facts, S.O says, arguments on online fora would be ill-balanced and debates will not be informed: "government can't…nobody can argue with the facts or the data that is self-revealing".

BudgIT's enterprise strategy as an activist project works through securing public data for dissemination from both "primary and secondary sources". A primary source would be the government budget office, the office of the Account-General, while a secondary source may be the CBN website [Central Bank of Nigeria]. Data from these sources are taken and verified by BudgIT analysts, before being sent to the visualisation and development team "where we say how can we bring a story out of this data", according to S.O. He adds that, "we build graphics to ensure that it is interesting, a bit more appealing and people can connect with it."

On the circulation of the data, S.O says it's all public, on the website, in print, available to "civil society networks", and others "downloaded and printed independently." He continues: "We usually have this non-attribution stance, so you can pick it up and use it for yourself, it's all good…it's not a competitive stuff – the end goal is let's collaborate more, let's amplify the voices and the solutions…" On Twitter, S.O shares data using "small flashcards" that contain budget information as a means of linking up

to his website. Facebook is another tool he uses, combined with civil society groups on social networks, SMS, and "google groups of people." S.O says "more of them use these data to also make their own judgements – those are just the digital tools we use." For SMS, he says, perhaps one can send a text message requesting for some data from the budget, for instance, "you want monthly allocation for Anambra for this period, you just get it." Lastly, BudgIT is working with Maliyo games, an online gaming company to develop a web app. S.O says, "we have apps. We don't have a mobile app yet, but we have a web app. We have a mobile site, but we have a web app. And the web app, we are working with one with Maliyo games. They are building an android budget app for us."

Analysis and Discussion

From these small case examples we can gain an insight into the expressive potential of small-scale digital media enterprises as agents of activism in an embryonic public sphere. Each case was based on an interview with an entrepreneurial individual and whose role as agent of this new public sphere was innovative and in no way predictable. Older models of political activist or community leader or agent of social mobilisation are not appropriate. These individuals exhibit the enterprising skills of a business entrepreneur, enterprise manager, but whose enterprise played a central role in the processes of democratisation I above ascribed to the impacts of the internet, and effects of digital media tools more generally. Digital media has opened up a space in which citizens are able to be more expressive about their opinions – and that is obvious. What is more crucial, however, is that huge realms of public information, data or political activity, are digested and presented to specific categories of citizen. Aside from the debates and public opinion, which form the essential communicative content of any functioning public sphere, these cases articulate the need for specific forms of activism – providing certain kinds of content (objective, informational, data-sourced or factual) for such. These enterprises underline a critical issue for actors and agents in a new embryonic public sphere – the media (not just content) is crucial. And by media we mean a management of the relation between device,

communicative act and engaged recipient or citizen – and where this relation is reciprocal, (which old media found very difficult, if not politically prohibitive).

The enterprising activism of the new digital public sphere, finds it much easier to cluster public opinion, which then builds a propensity to present the demand for social change or effect some form of political intervention. The cases all illustrate not only the importance of access (downloads, for example), but free access. Activist organisations tend not to monetise their essential services. Egunje.info, the Nigerian constitution app and BudgIT exist to support an emerging digital public sphere, not to at the same time present that sphere with a financial condition. Born out of a political consciousness of human rights and freedoms once deprived Nigerian citizens by the military junta of the past, and not least the rank poverty that resulted, the case interviewees all testified to a personal commitment to social justice, and this at the cost of immediate financial reward. At the same time, there was no expectation of public or governmental funding or the immediate donations that might come from a wealthy progressive middle class – and this has driven activists to develop profound entrepreneurial skills.

Whilst celebrating the potentials of digital media for democracy can be found on the countless websites of social movements or NGOs, we require more specific and analytical examples of the ways in which enterprise and activism can be more strategically and specifically applied. It will also remain important to critically address the reverse side of the Internet – as host to the worst, undemocratic movements, as stimulant of new forms of populism and misinformation. The internet does not in itself provide for the forms of political education that allow newcomers to tell fact from fiction. An education system and social involvement in public dialogue remains a considerable component of any emergent public sphere. Evgeny Morozov, in his 2012 book *Net Delusion*, argues that the 'counter-hegemonic' power of the internet is a "delusion" and "to salvage Internet's promise to aid and fight against authoritarianism…" we must eschew "cyber-utopianism and Internet-centrism". Rather, we must engage in a realist assessment of the attendant risks and dangers associated with the Internet, especially when situated in local contexts (2011: xviii). Morozov is not one of the many commentators (far Left and Right) who 'demonise' the Internet, he simply calls

for a recalibration of online activity with social activity.

In our three cases: certain themes stand out. Their enterprise activism maintained a strategic understanding of the relation between appropriate new media platforms, certain communication techniques, and the nature of their content. The substantive content and dynamics of an emerging public sphere, I would argue, depend on such a strategic comprehension if such activist entrepreneurship is to intervene in political discourse and stimulate a 'culture' of democracy. As Morozov suggests, we must contextualise any talk of digital media, particularly the internet, and not be deluded by the rhetoric of globalisation and its pretence to political universalism. While global civil society can be said to exist, the reality on the ground in Nigeria is determined by specific place-based activities of the kinds of enterprises discussed above, which engage directly with constituents of citizens whom they know and possess knowledge of.

BudgIt as a social initiative, operates from a website, social media channels, as well as traditional print leaflets. The use of printed leaflets is such place-based activity that engages 'street-level' citizens. The architecture of digital space, like Twitter, is then populated by a more substantive actor. However, in SO's opinion - "the conversation style, layout, makes you express yourself and just move on…" However, it can be argued that the ability to "just move on" in online interaction also poses a challenge. To move on from a debate without granting the subject matter substantial time for critical deliberation raises issues as to how effective the digital public sphere in itself might be. Unlike Habermas' classical public sphere that was mostly 'face-to-face', the digital public sphere brings participants spatially dispersed across several geographical locations into one discussion, but they are not in anyway bound to remain there, that is, in the conversation. Conversations online are transient. This transiency in turn limits the impact online deliberations may have on the governance decisions taken by the state over the people – knowing the people will "move on" after some time. This raises the need to develop a strategy around transience, consistency and permanency. Perhaps this can be done through live archiving, or perhaps through forging political alliances with broadcast media. The Nigerian budget, for example, can be a complicated discussion and perhaps in rural areas more

effectively mediated by a radio and TV discussion, supported with online platforms content.

Concerning the architecture of a social network site such as Twitter, (that restricts each entry to 140 characters), certain issues can be avoided or discarded because their complexity cannot be adapted to fit into a series of 'tweets'. Other challenges plague other platforms. Facebook for instance, is less 'open' as one needs to send requests so as to add someone to your network (unlike Twitter, where you may simple "follow" or "unfollow" a profile). Instagram has an architecture better suited to pictures than written forms of deliberation, albeit having the "comment" function. It is equally clear that imagery has a place in a digital public sphere, but their role in linguistic discourse can be instable. All of the above illustrate how segmented and disjointed digital media platforms can be, and how digital media can as easily fragment a public sphere or at least limit its potentiality for effecting a collective participation in an emergent democratic culture. New ways of integrate platforms are indeed ameliorating this to some degree (where, say, a user may post the same content to Twitter, Facebook, and other social network sites at the same time), but this of course depends on the individual's tech-savvy-ness, education and availability of internet in the first instance, raising issues internal to arguments over 'digital democracy'.

For the Nigerian Constitution for Blackberry app, the interview with the creators revealed that they had proactively partnered with a local radio show on WaZoBia FM, "Know Your Rights", through which they publicise the app and encourage discussion around the content of the Nigerian constitution. Here is how they describe the radio programme: "They take a section of the constitution every week…and they discuss it, they break it down – 'this is what this means to you". This program is in pidgin (a Nigerian version of the English language), so anybody who is Nigerian should be able to relate to it…People call in afterwards, and based on that topic, they can ask questions." Z& B offered an example of a caller who wanted clarification about what the law says regarding an issue concerning his landlord/tenancy agreement. This example exemplifies certain key points. Firstly, that mainstream broadcast media (radio and television, or newspapers) may in some places remain critical to *digital media's* ability to stimulate a culture of democracy Secondly, the challenge of literacy (and digital literacy) in local

contexts, must remain a priority.

For the Nigerian Constitution for Blackberry App, the respondents identified language as a barrier to users' adoption of the app, and are working towards providing the same content in Nigerian local languages. Language as a barrier to effectively participating in the digital public sphere as an active citizen calls for a critical consideration on how to ameliorate this challenge. One suggestion would be that local technology companies be supported to produce local-centric technologies that meet the needs of the immediate society. Also, digital media technologies that are visual or voice-based, for instance, YouTube, are more amenable to adapting local languages. Hence, the communication techniques and strategies of cultural and social activists need to do more to take advantage of these platforms.

On the other hand, humour is a strong component of S.A's online interaction and communication. In his interview, he mentions that humour is what determines whether his "informational tweets" will get any traction, so he builds a technique around it. Further on, he explains that to pass across a message, in this case, educate people about corruption, you needed to "attract people first". "What gets them attracted to your message is the humour; it's showing something to be ridiculous, or…super-interesting…now they are interested, you can start to come out with the detail…" Here, we see a depiction of principles of marketing and creative entrepreneurship transform to activism. S.A has a target audience for his message when he goes online, and he seeks to acquire a captive audience for his social message.

Another communication technique through which S.A supports his activism online is through spreading "animated cartoons on corruption". They have been produced in mobile-friendly version in order to enable them to be shared "from Blackberry to Blackberry." Once again, S.A demonstrates a consciousness of his target market for his messages, including the digital platforms or devices they would most likely use to access his messages.

When S.A is on Twitter, he says "I have evolved my own style." This "style" is to share information he considers people do not have access to, and use hashtags "with lots of examples." Usually, S.A says he would then find someone who is ready to engage him critically and then "use that as an opportunity to now go deeper and share a lot more." On dialoguing and interacting online, S.A says "a conversation by yourself is a bit boring."

Lastly, S.A in his interview shared the use of SMS versus Twitter in launching social campaigns online. He describes the techniques as "SMS blast" and "Twe-minars." In his account, S.A says it was not financially sustainable to run his campaign via SMS in bringing traffic to engage on his anti-corruption website, egunje.info. This led him to seek a more affordable alternative on Twitter though conducting "twe-minars."

Twe-minars are simply traditional seminars, but conducted via Twitter. S.A says he had made initial plans to conduct his seminars to a class of twenty-two people, but his organisation was only able to recruit nine volunteers to attend. This led him to Twitter, where his four training modules were split into tweets and published for "social media influencers" to amplify by retweeting onto their respective timelines. The use of social media influencers is reminiscent of advertising on radio, television or newspapers, albeit it that in this case, money may not have changed hands. In the field interviews, Twitter-Conferences & Tweminars were disclosed as significant communication techniques for engaging in discussions online. "Dialogue takes place in the Nigerian digital public sphere through organised Twitter meetings" says S.O.

S.O, the BudgIT founder says about Twitter use in Nigeria, it "is the biggest opposition party to government…". In this statement, he demonstrates his awareness that discussions within the online public sphere does affect the Nigerian government to some extent. Content from BudgIT and apps such as the Nigerian Constitution for Blackberry; have been instrumental in social movements such as the Occupy Nigeria protest, which led to the scale back by the government on the removal of fuel subsidy.

Conclusion

This paper has argued, through case examples of new emergent digital media enterprises, that an embryonic public sphere is emerging Nigeria, and it is emerging outside the normal parameters of social change (system reform of a system of governance).

Change is emerging partly through pressure (as with older forms of 'pressure group' tactics) but where this pressure issues from a panoply of debates and issues under discussion, and not a single issue or from a single interest group. Change is also issuing from the disclosure of information and the visible identification of government and its ministers as accountable to a realm of decision making outside their immediate political orbit. The significance of the situation in Nigeria is that empowered by new digital media, a panoply of new enterprises have emerged, by which harnessing new media technology they in effect create a new social space. This space is used and occupied by others without immediate regard for status or position, and this in turn generates a more widespread social consciousness of the conditions of political change. These conditions I locate in the public sphere's foregrounding of communication and deliberation, with concomitant issues to do with access to space, social interaction, literacy, information and the demand that the issues of government are a matter of rightful debate for the people. While it cannot be said that the situation in Nigeria – of random, improvised, media enterprises, mostly driven by individual entrepreneurs – constituted a fully formed public sphere or component of such, I assert that what currently exists is an embryonic public sphere, a 'culture' of democracy.

However, I also identify significant inhibitors to the growth of this 'culture' of democracy. Literacy, language and access to digital technology and internet broadband (poor communications infrastructure) are a few. Moreover, where digital technology is increasingly a private, market driven and always socially improvised space, there is a chronic need for public leadership if an embryonic public sphere will remain embryonic and not constitutive of the broader representation of interests required for full democratic public policy making. That the Nigerian digital public sphere is emerging in the agglomeration and networked interconnection of blogs, social network sites, and mobile phones – an entirely commercial realm – is not in itself prohibitive. Civil society is largely 'private'. And yet, capitalism and democracy are historically antagonistic. Dean (2003) for instance, discusses how "communicative capitalism" stands in the way of the Internet's potential for democracy, as evidenced in the "expansion and intensification of communication and entertainment" (2003: 102). In a

later paper she presages what we now take for granted, that the internet's vast and fragmented range of users do not meet the popular inclusivity criterion that democracy requires (1997: 278). The freedom we suppose digital media provide is the "freedom of the market" where "large corporations, pornographers, hackers, and environmentalists" thrive (ibid.).

So we conclude with this thought – which is the constitution of Nigeria's 'embryonic' public sphere. As empirical research can easily show, digital media and the internet have been used to empower agents and agencies, in tracking government's activities through crowdsourcing information and whole host of other democratic activities. Yet it remains that poor access, poor digital literacy, language barriers, and other challenges, attest to the continued need of traditional, state supported, broadcast media, along with government-led public policy making in education, social rights, and infrastructure.

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