SITUATING NIGERIAN NEWSPAPERS ONLINE READERS' COMMENTS WITHIN HABERMA'S PUBLIC SPHERE

Toyin S. Onayinka , Asor K. Tsebee and Ayotunde Alao

Abstract

Habermas's Public Sphere provided a platform of permeableness, permanence and freedom of discourse to groups that were generally seen but not heard. Therefore, the work investigated online newspapers comments section and how such comments could be situated within Habermas's Public sphere. The study brought to the fore, through the identification of 'tipping point comments' the underlying normative influences in the selected internet public discourse by participants as it affected the 'Chibok girls' and '#BringBackOurGirls' saga. It discovered that newspaper online comments were variegated even from a common theme. The paper therefore concluded that the presence of a unifying topical theme was not enough moderation to limit comments within a boundary of a dominant discourse. In newspaper online readers' comments, anything and everything were able to have space and were therefore allowed. The paper recommended that such public sphere discourse should be seen as a form of feedback by government officials.

Keywords: Habermas, Public sphere, Chibok girls, newspaper, online comments

Introduction

Sub-Sahara Africa is a late adopter of Information communication Technology (ICT) (Longe, L., Ngwa, Wada, Mbarika., 2009)   arising largely from decades of poverty and underdevelopment induced by poor government structures. Due to the wind of democracy sweeping throughout the world, governments in sub-Saharan Africa gradually allowed free flow of communication and information most especially through ICT, Nigeria is no exception (Pigato, 2001).

Before the adoption of ICT in Nigeria, two media poles were distinguishable. The first pole accommodated the media as the defender of the voiceless and helpless, the defender of 'democracies' while the second pole accommodated the 'commercialization and politicization' of news.

The adoption of ICT opened up a closed communication and information sharing system, in such a way that modern communication and information platforms were no longer the exclusive rights of the few privileged in the society. The closed communication and information sharing system limited the power of the majority to have a say on how they were governed. ICT therefore, introduced a new space that allowed for individuals to create and manage information which could be shared instantly with friends, acquaintances, colleagues or the whole world (Castells, 2009). It was a space that offered freedom to the voiceless and opened a new vista of freedom that allowed individual to be heard on issues that affected individuals; from economy, education, politics to social life.

The engagement of internet therefore provided a new network of communication and sharing environment closely linked to Haberma's public sphere which created a social space for 'rational-critical debate about public issues' (Habermas, 1992). The

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paper therefore examined the underlying normative influences in the selected internet public discourse by participants against the backdrop of Haberma's postulation. The study attempted an answer to the question – Do online news readers' comments exemplify public debates on critical public issues as fore-grounded by Haberma's public sphere? The paper therefore highlighted influence of 'virtual-determined' discourse, such as the internet, to provide a voice for the voiceless and how the voiceless employed such medium to advance their cause(s) to influence government policies.

Literature Review

The structural transformation of the Public Sphere as advanced by Habermas (1989[1962]) opened a window of freedom to participate in the communication and information spaces prevalent in the cosmopolitan Europe of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Public Sphere provided a platform of permeableness, permanence and freedom of discourse to groups that were generally seen but not heard. The comparability of public sphere as conceived by Habermas to the present day new media was therefore pertinent. The internet, as adopted by the people, amplified Habermas Public Sphere's " only in the light of the public sphere did that which existed becomes revealed, did everything become visible to all" (Habermas, 1991). From the foregoing, the internet offered the space for individuals to share their thoughts, opinions, facts and falsehood realtime. The internet, therefore, promoted the concurrent demystification, unrestricted and massification of 'public interest' news items in the public domain. It provided ample opportunity for private individuals to contribute to the topical issue of the day.

Reinforcing the above standpoint, Castells (2009), defined mass self-communication as an interractive communication, where individuals can send message to many in real time or chosen time, and with the possibility of using point-to-point communication, narrowcasting or broadcasting, depending on the purpose and characteristics of the intended communication. Self communication, using the internet was a form of mass communication, because of its capacity to reach a global audience. There was therefore a fusion of the unidentified, nameless and voiceless individual and the unidentified rich individual through the new media.

The power and place of the new media in shaping and providing a platform for the marginalized to express themselves in order to influence government policies cannot be underrated. Such platform often bordered on socio-political and economic influenced opinions comparable with what Sen (2012) described as Political public spheres which included social movements, media that monitor and criticize the state, and groups that take political action. Sen (2012) further pointed out that the explosion of debate, blogging, theorizing and hype around the role of the internet in today's social movements -internet applications such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – was because of its capacity to facilitate the creation and exchange of user-created content. Internet user created content had been identified as key to events as diverse as the rise of student protests in Britain at the end of 2010, the outbreak of revolution in the Arab world, the role that social media played in the Egyptian uprising and the protests of the Wall Street against the global capitalism in the USA (McQuail, 2010); (Jones, 2011). The power of the new media to effectively influence the course of history could be linked with the

freedom existing in the public sphere. "The public sphere can best be described as a network of communicating information and points of view" which is "reproduced through communicative action" (Habermas, 1991), The public sphere involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern, where issues relevant to the public good could be subjected to informed debate and examination. The public sphere thus presupposed freedom of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making. (Habermas, 1991)

The nexus between new media and Habermas's Public sphere could be seen in the following 3 institutionalized criteria: disregard of status, common concern and inclusivity (Sen, 2012). The satisfaction of public sphere established the position of new media as a form of public sphere which could not simply be ignored. The internet promoted a disregard of status in such a manner that, location, distance, were not limiters of the freedom to express one's opinion. Also, it allowed for the easy congregation of people sharing the same concern, hopes, fears and aspirations. In addition, the level of inclusivity holds no barrier, provided the basic tool of access to the internet is acquired (Habermas, 1991).

Gerhads, Schafer, 2009 pointed out, with reference to Jankowski and van Selm (2000), Rucht et al.,(2008), Van de Donket al., (2004) and VanOs et al., (2007), that many political scientists, media researchers and other scholars, as well as political activists, believed that internet communication made a better public sphere than the old mass media. In view of the space provided for the individual to participate in the Internet public sphere and the inherent freedom allowed, there was the gaping need to analyse the normative influence(s) which determined the content and tone of readers' comments/reactions and its thresholds in public sphere. The space provided by the internet was such that political participation were enhanced and promoted. Online petitions were signed by millions; demonstrations were organized online; a huge diversity of politically oriented groups operate on social networking and media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Also, Internet activity played an important part in the revolutions and mass protests in Arab states in 2011 (Bimber, 2003) (Oxford Internet Institute-Understanding Life Online, 2014).

Another critical theory to this study is the Tipping Point theory as propounded by Gladwell. Gladwell (2000) referred to those moments when an idea, trend, or social behaviour crosses a threshold, tips and spreads like wildfire; or when ideas and products and messages and behaviours spread just like viruses do; or when the interconnectivity of people using the Internet greatly facilitates the epidemic-like rise of new ideas.

According to Brown (2006) The Tipping Point examined why ideas, messages, and behaviours are often ignited by one or two people to spread like contagious diseases, changing society suddenly and unexpectedly. Assembling a cornucopia of anecdotes and facts, to illustrate concepts in epidemiology, psychology, sociology, and group dynamics, Gladwell answers two fundamental questions that lie at the heart of what educators, parents, marketers, business people, and policymakers would like to accomplish: Why do some ideas/behaviors/products start epidemics and others do not?.

Tipping Point theory though relevant to this study had not gained much in-road into new media. Its weakness lies in its failure to address the gap between the freedom of

expression owned by individual participating in the sphere and their differences which may affect the flow of the discourse. However, such gap, as highlighted above, can be addressed by partitioning discussions into each divide.

Theoretical Framework

A major thematic framework perspective of this study therefore was to posit that it was not enough that the new media ecology created the enabling environment for active participation in the public sphere but that at what point did we move from talking to action or to reference Gladwell's (2000) Tipping Point; in order words, at what point in the discussion did we start noticing tipping points comments? At what point did the conversation shift from a general tone to amenable tone?

There was therefore a major consideration of the theory of Tipping Point as a major anchor of the theoretical framework of this work. Working with the many opportunities created by the internet space in the area of enhancement of political participation, online petitions, ease of organizing demonstration, political re-orientation; the question that came to mind was that at what point during the various internet sphere engagements was the tipping point achieved?

Tipping point in this context referred to that statement or word that propelled participants to action, such that there was a movement from the point of planning and posting comments to action as promoted by access to the internet. The allusion was vividly captured by Gladwelll, (2000) when he asserted that a system had a tipping point at x if a small change in the value of x had large effects on the end state. In more formal language, if x was a tipping point, the end state given x- differed by a large amount from the end state given x+. In other words, what is the tipping point of online comments on a given news item? At what stage is the tipping point reached? What can stampede the comment to the tipping point? What identifies the tipping point and emphasises and promotes such tipping point? (Lamberson, Scott , 2012).

Therefore, the level of internet influenced activities generated by the abduction of over 200 girls of the Government Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State was the major motivation and attraction for juxtaposing tipping point comments with Habermas's Public sphere as a way of inquiring into the various manners of internet engagement by users

Methodology

Study Focus

On April 15, 2014, a militant islamist sect, the Jama'atuAhlisSunnaLidda'AwatiWal-jihad, also known as Boko Haram (western education is forbidden) (USIS, 2012) and based in northeast Nigeria abducted over 200 girls of the Government Secondary School, Chibok, Borno State. The abductees were consequently referred to as 'Chibok Girls'. The brazenness of the abduction generated a spontaneous worldwide reactions such that Google search engine for 'kidnapped Chibok girls in Nigeria" reveals about 22,100,000 of related information on web (Google, 2014) over 411, 000 related videos were posted and over 495 related images (Google, 2014). The web stories ranged from information, news items, photos, etc while the videos posted by news organizations, government

agencies, private individuals have attracted thousands of comments. A Nigerian daily reported that by May 7th, 2014, BBC World TV was reporting that the #BringBackOurGirls hash tag was already re-tweeted a million times, while on the same day, a Google search of "Bring back our Girls, yields 2.1Billion results. The Nigerian daily also added that the WALL STREET JOURNAL reported that the #BringBackOurGirls had been re-tweeted more than 2 million times by 11th of May 13, 2014. (Kawu, 2014) less than a month after the abduction.

The Nigerian government initial reactions to the abduction were regarded as apathetic and bordering on a state of denial. However, following spates of public criticism of government inaction regarding the Chibok girls, there were series of reactions from government. One of such reactions was the meeting called by Mrs. Patience Jonathan, wife of the President and the effect of the public outcry which led to the meeting called by her to find solution to the problem at hand could be seen in her statement that "I have been dealing with this secretly but you have taken me to the market square. There is no more hiding." (Punch Newspaper, 2014). The Punch Newspaper, (2014) captioned the meeting "Kidnapped girls: Patience Jonathan takes over investigation". Her conduct during the meeting, where she uttered the popular 'broken English' question "Na only you waka come?" meaning 'Are you the only one that came for the meeting? in a formal gathering, while addressing one of the invited government officials at the meeting, provided a lot of comic relief to the traumatized society. The 130 on line comments to the story as accessed on 7th May, 2014 served as the data for the study.

Data gathering
According to Onlinenewspaper.com, (2014), out of the Top 50 Nigeria Online newspapers, the first top five were Vanguard Newspaper, The Punch, The Guardian, Nigerian Tribune, and The Nation. Out of the first top 5, only The Guardian failed to report the story. However, out of the four online newspapers that reported the story, (TheNationonline, 2014) (Vanguard Newspaper, 2014) (Nigerian Tribune, 2014)The Punch's story attracted 130 comments, Vanguard Newspaper's story attracted 53 comments, The Nation's story attracted 38 comments while the Nigerian Tribune's story attracted 11 comments. Since the combined comments from the 3 newspapers were not up to that of The Punch , it was assumed that the comments from The Punch would offer comments of varied contents than any of the remaining papers combined, hence, the selection of The Punch as the source of the data for the study.

Coding Frame
The main thematic consideration was Tipping Point comments. In other words, what category of comments could be flagged as capable of 'pushing' participants or government in the online exchanges to action? The comments were therefore coded according to: (a) Comments bordering on solution to the problem at hand and sub categorized as – those directed at government or those directed at the general public in the bucket of 'positive opinions', which were regarded as the tipping points comments (b) The second category of comments were those that were not capable of achieving any

tipping point effect but were still comments related to the issue at hand and thus categorized as 'negative opinion' and sub categorised as – those directed at government or those directed at the general public. The third category were those comments that have no thematic relevance but none the less still related to the Chibok saga relevant to the issue at hand while the fourth category, though may be political but had no relevance to the thematic concern and were consequently categorized as neutral comments

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION
(i) Analysis
From the coding, it could be established as follows:

Positive Comments		Negative Comments		Related Comments	Neutral Comments	Total
G	P	G				
		P				
0	6	0		25	97	130
		2				

G: Government   P: Public

From the 130 comments, only 6 comments could be regarded as having the properties of tipping point, and in order to bring them to the fore, they were presented below:
Tipping Point Comment (Positive) TPC(P) 1: "…let someone call her to order"
TPC(P) 2: "They jusy (sic) have to be flushed out"
TPC(P) 3: "… Why don't muslim nations organize a giant search party and hunt these Boko Haram people down sector by sector?" (sic)
TPC(P) 4: "… or we roll in our artillery to bail out our girls…." (sic)
TPC(P) 5: "…we should refrain from politicizing this security issue." (sic)
TPC(P) 6: "Let us take our destiny in our hands. President Jonathan cannot save us say his wife." (sic)
All other shades of comments were isolated because they were not contributing to the theme of the study.

Discussion
The paper examined the underlying normative influences in the selected internet public discourse by participants. The study attempted an answer to the question – Do online news readers' comments exemplify public debates on critical public issues as fore-grounded by Haberma's public sphere? The study aimed at providing normative influences of such online comments on current public discourse. From the interests generated by the Chibok saga, it was assumed that the comments will provide enough information that will enable the authors provide an insight on how online comments could be situated within Haberma's public sphere. From the analysis of the online comments and what the authors could impugned, the normative influences that determined the online comments could be inferred through exchanges of participants

that were characterised by discursive and participatory engagements. The normative influences waivered from focal area of discussion, that is, the kidnap saga to the prevailing socio-political and economic environment in Nigeria. However, there was no preponderance of focused discussion. Emphasis was on individual's point of view rather than a convergence of opinions. The possible effect of the comments on the ruling elites were lost as a result of non-convergence of opinions. Therefore, when juxtaposed with Habermas' public sphere, the analysed comments exhibited deficiencies which could not be ignored: For instance, the 75 percent of the comments were disjointed, lacked focus and mostly irrelevant to the news item. The above standpoint correlated with the submission of Habermas's notion of 'reflexive publicity' in Structural Transformation; according to Goode (2005), "the digital age may not equip us to see through the 'distortions' of mediated communication and unravel an objective (that is, unmediated) version of reality…." The 'distortions' could be linked with the study through the fact that only 4.16 percent of the comments anaylsed had any relationship with the topical issue. Hence, the strength of the comments to provide a unified force to compel action was lost, hence no amenable tipping point(s) comments.

The reasons for the paucity of tipping points comments on the Chibok saga were not farfetched. According to Margetts, John, Escher, Reissfelder, (2011) there is need for a form of coordination before any form of reinforcement of collective goal can be achieved. From the online comments, no leader or a coordinator could be identified, hence, it could be alluded that the absence of any form of coordination influenced the lack of persistency on the Chibok girls saga theme which is contrary to the works of Benkler, (2006), (Bimber, Flanagin, Stohl, 2006), (Bimber, Flanigan, and Stohl, 2012), Shirky, (2008). Thus, the normative influence and its capacity to unify participants' opinions were lost.

Therefore, the multiplicity of mediation and the freedom of participant to choose the theme of comment(s), when to join or exit the discourse may not necessarily create the Habermasian café. Closely related to the argument is Habermas's (1992) position that rather than the internet contributing towards the emergence of a global public sphere, it is exacerbating the fragmentation of public life and the proliferation of cultural enclaves .

Conclusion
The paper studied a chosen newspaper online comments and how they could be situated within Habermas's Public sphere. It discovered that newspaper online comments were variegated even from a common theme. The presence of a unifying topical theme was not enough moderation to limit comments within a boundary of a dominant discourse. In newspaper online readers' comments, anything and everything were able to have space and were therefore allowed.

Recommendation
This study opened a new vista into how leaders can leverage on online comments to harvest populace reactions to Government decisions. There is therefore the need to see on line comments as a form of feed-back.

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