

Exploring Social Media as Channels for Sustaining African Culture

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Abstract

Social media are becoming significant channels for information dissemination and communication around the world today. Internet and social media users run into hundred thousands daily; with young people constituting a large percentage. With the internet technology, social media, which consists of YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, blogs, MySpace, have made the communication process faster, interactive, user friendly and enabling user-generated contents. All these make the influence of social media far reaching; with good sides and bad sides to it. In its wake, Africans have lamented that social media are filled with western-based ideas, values and culture which is deepening the eroding of African culture, even to the point of threatening their extinction. This paper aims at examining how the technologically framed social media can be put to use in sustaining the rich cultures spread across the African continent.

Keywords: Technology, Social media, Africa, Culture, Mass media

Introduction

New technology is changing the way people receive and consume mass communication. The media of today are becoming more specialized and personal as well as having more impact in reshaping society's reality. Bray (2007) posits that society has always been impacted by technology. Each invention has affected how people relate to one another and how cultures have expanded or ended.

Technology has become a critical part of our everyday life. Omoniyi (2005:1-2) defines technology as the acquisition of skills in art. It is the branch of knowledge dealing with scientific and industrial methods of doing things in an environment. What is referred to as mass media today is a product of technological advancement but in equipment and software. The mass media is nothing without technology. According to Oghogho (2008:214),

the technologies of mass media are products progressive development and diffusion, starting from the spread of printing as a form of communication to the birth of the oral (radio) and visual (cinema) communication and then to television – the most powerful medium of communication. Today's technologies are a consequence of endless improvement to the foregoing forms of communication media.

With technology, mass communication has moved beyond traditional media of radio, television, newspaper, magazines, film, and book. The Internet and its platforms are revolutionizing the communication process. New forms like phone media, social media and new media have come up and are being used in various ways to disseminate information to a large heterogeneous group of people in the same or different environment who are socially related or emotionally connected to us.

Social media has come to stay as a notable platform for information and communication in this 21st century. Individuals, for personal uses, are employing social media and even organisations use them for promotions and corporate communications.

With this media form, thousands and even millions of people are able to simultaneously create content, share experiences, build relationships and engage in other forms of productive work and meaningful activities. This highlights the significance of social media today. Edosomwan et al (2011) explained that the social media is a phenomenon that has transformed the interaction and communication of individuals throughout the world; impacting many aspects of human communication.

In contemporary society, according to Ohiagu and Okorie (2014), much of media communication finds expression in various social media platforms. Social media have also become embedded in our everyday lives that they largely fashion our perceptions, understandings, construction of meanings, and general view of reality or the world.

Theoretical Framework: Technological Determinism Theory

Technological determinism is a reductionist theory that presumes that a society's technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. The theory seeks to show technical developments, media, or technology as a whole, as the major driver in social change.

Historically, the theory is traced to Thorstein Veblen, Karl Marx and Marshall McLuhan who expanded it in the 1960's. McLuhan in 1962 explains technological determinism as inventions in technology that invariably cause cultural change. Put another way, the modes of communication shape human existence. According to McQuail (2005), technological determinism theory lies on the following assumptions:

1. Communication technology is basic to society. It is the life blood of any society.
2. Technology drives change in all forms of media industries.
3. Each technology is tilted towards particular communication forms, contents and uses.
4. The sequence of invention and application of technology influence social change.
5. Communication revolutions engender social revolutions.
6. New media undermines old bases of power.

As a theory, technological determinism explains that when new systems of technology are developed; the culture or society is immediately changed to reflect the senses needed to use the new technology. It predicts that with every new technological equipment, members of the society change and adapt to that technology. They probably will dispose of older technological equipment and rush to get new ones. This is on the belief that it will affect their status in the society. Members of the society can either use the technological equipment or software to sustain their culture or use it to embrace another culture which is not their own.

There is a simple cause and effect analysis between the introduction of new technology, the way the media operates and the changes in society's way of thinking, feeling, or acting. This theory provides an insight into the use of internet and social media for communication in modern times. Following the internet and its advantages in easing communication, more and more users are getting on social media, especially young people. There are more than 1.32 billion monthly active users (as of June 2014) on the Internet (Tufts University, 2015).

This theory underlies this paper as it reflects the use and acceptance of social media today. Technological determinism theory posits that new technology drives society and influences social change; society members adopt and change to fit to new technological inventions. This can be said to be the case of social media as a new means of communication. Users of Social media keep increasing by the day. Ohiagu and Okorie (2014) puts the figure at "25 percent of the global online population has joined social media networking sites". Especially among young people, social media has been embraced wholeheartedly as major means of communication. It is seen as a sign of social relevance and being trendy to be on social media. For youths, one has to be on these sites to connect with people, to know the latest news, style, and trends.

Social media contents directly or indirectly shape users' perceptions and influence their views of reality. Ohiagu and Okorie express this thoughts thus, "Social media shape most offline expression and behaviour since people export their social experiences into their real life situations."

The Nature and Use of Social Media

Social media are online means of interactions among people; involving computer-mediated tools and Internet-based applications that allow people to create, process, share or exchange information, ideas, pictures and videos.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated contents. An online source says, "Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration (whatis.com, 2014).

From the foregoing, social media are media for interaction and relationships; largely informal and they are now popular means of communication and quite accessible. They are popular because they can be accessed with ease on a variety of platforms – laptops, netbooks, PCs, tablet computers, and smartphones (Dominick 2012:94).

Social media takes on different forms including internet forums, microblogging, podcasts, social networking, bookmarking, wikis, social curation, weblogging. Examples of social media includes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Linked in, MySpace, blogs, Flickr, Buzz, MySpace, Orkut and other highly interactive websites.

Social media is categorized thus because of its interpersonal and user-generated nature. It is about conversations, community, connecting with the audience and building relationships. It not only allows users to hear what people say about them, their preferences and choices, but also enables users to respond and make comments.

Social media embodies features like interactivity, adoptability, portability and convergence. These features have led to their phenomenal growth and usage. The total estimated global active Internet audience is now 625 million. Mobile internet usage has now reached nearly a fifth of all active internet users. From *www.matthewingram.com* it is stated that there are 200, 000, 000 active user of Facebook with 100, 000, 000 users logging on at least once every day in 170 countries/territories in 35 different language. It is also estimated that there are an average of 100 friends for every Facebook user (Morah and Uzochukwu, 2010).

Another obvious characteristic of social media is its lacks of strict institutional gatekeeping as present in traditional media. Users of social media have freedom to write and post all sorts of materials, which might not be socially responsible, and unethically right to people connected to them on it.

Furthermore, social media outlets are not paid for. This is one reason that accounts for the large number of users on these sites all around the world. Most of these social media sites are free; users just need to be connected to the Internet, register and they open to a use any social media channel for interaction and communication. Here are examples of popular social media forms:

- **Facebook** is a popular free social networking website that allows registered users to create personal profiles, add other users as friends, give status updates, send messages, upload photos and video and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues. It is the world's largest social network, with more than 1.32 billion monthly active users (as of June 2014 (Tufts University, 2015)). Users create a personal profile, add other users as friends, and exchange messages, including status updates. Organisations and brands create pages and Facebook users can "like" brands' pages.
- **Twitter** is a free social networking and microblogging platform that allows registered members to stay connected and broadcast short posts (140-character limit) called tweets. Twitter members can follow each other and rebroadcast other users' tweets.
- **LinkedIn** is a social networking site designed specifically for professionals with similar areas of interest. It enables users to information and participate in conversations. The goal of the site is to allow registered members to establish and document networks of people they know, trust and connect with professionally.
- **Pinterest** is a social curation website for sharing and categorizing images and photos found according to individual interests and preferences. Clicking on an image on Pinterest will take you to the original source of the image. Example, if you click on a picture of a furniture or dress, the user will be taken to a site where he can purchase them. An image of wedding might take you to the recipe; a picture of a bicycle might take you to the instructions on how to couple it.
- **Instagram:** it is a free photo and video sharing platform that allows users to apply digital filters, frames and special effects to their photos and then share them with followers and on other social networking sites.
- **Flickr:** It is similar to Instagram; it is an image and video hosting website with a community of friends. Photos can be shared on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking sites.

- **YouTube & Vimeo:** They are websites on which users post videos free of charge which can be accessed and viewed by anyone in the world.

African Culture and Effects of New Media Communication

Culture is the thick human web that binds a community or group of people as one. It is the little intrinsic things, which are common, important and significant to a particular people. Culture has generally been referred to behavior, values, shared ideas, and attitudes of people who are bound together by environment, language and location. Culture is therefore necessary for a healthy society. It is usually established from enlightenment and acquired through education, observation and exposure to the environment.

Ogwezzy (2008:21-22) succinctly defines culture as the beliefs, customs, traditions, practices and behaviors of a particular nation or people. Culture distinguishes one human group from the other. People's culture includes their rules of behavior, language, rituals, arts, dress codes, religion and economic systems. Muchira (2001) citing Ngugi (1972) looking at culture in its broadest sense says:

Culture is a way of life fashioned by people in their collective endeavor to live and to come to terms with their total environment. It is the sum of their art, their science and all their social institutions including their system of beliefs and rituals. In the course of this creative struggle and progress through history, there evolves a body of material and spiritual values, which endow that society with unique ethos. Such values are often expressed through people's songs, dances, folklore, drawing, sculpture, rites and ceremonies. Over the years, these varieties of artistic activity have come to symbolize the meaning of the word culture.

Onabajo (2005) breaks down culture to comprise material, institutional, philosophical and creative aspects. The material aspect has to do with artifacts in its broadest form (tools, clothing, food, medicine, utensils, housing etc.). The institutional aspect deals with the political, social, legal and economic structures and spiritual objectives. The creative aspect is concerned with a people's literature (oral and written) as well as their visual and performing arts which are normally molded by as well as help to mould other aspects or culture.

African culture relates to the beliefs, customs, traditions, practices and behaviours of different people in human groups or tribes within the African continent. It is a product of interactions of the diverse people that inhabit Africa (past and present). Africa has numerous numbers of ethnic cultures; diverse and varying from country to country within the continent.

In African culture, it is taken that actions speak louder than words. The following are aspects or practices in African cultures that cut across different African countries: showing respect to elders, greeting one another, receiving gifts with both hands, eating with the left hand is considered abominable, rendering service to one another, not publicly showing anger, impatience and other negative feelings especially to older people, not giving or receiving things with left hand.

Communication is the bedrock of any culture. Culture and values are passed and kept alive from generation to generation through communication and socialization. This is enunciated in the cultural transmission function of the mass media. The media makes for the sustenance of a culture through its coverage and reporting of people and activities of a particular culture. Thus helping people of other culture know and appreciate the culture.

Regarding ICTs and its relation to culture, Ohiagu (2010) notes that the impact of ICTs on the Nigerian people has both a positive and a negative thrust. While these technologies have the potential of eroding local cultures even to the point of threatening their extinction, yet they equally provide a podium for global societies and cultures (Nigerian people and culture inclusive) to meet and interact.

The same is the fear of social media. Many Africans see it as polluting African culture and influencing African youths negatively because of its major western culture content. They lament its impact on the attitude, behavior, language and ways of life of Africans. Johnson (2012) declares thus, "the exploding new media realities and globalization are sensed as both a gift and a threat especially to African culture. The new info media technologies have created new spaces and new contexts for the emerging new virtual and cyber communities where amalgamation of varied cultures of different civilizations and races is taking place. The African culture is not an exception here."

Utilizing Social Media in the Sustenance of African Culture

In all, the increasing usage and prominence of social media cannot be ruled out. Here in Africa, the social media is one which has a growing population of users and audience. What needs to be done is to find ways to harness the potentials of social media and use them as channels to transmit and make for sustenance of the African culture. The following are some of the ways:

1. Global Nature of Social Media: Social media is global in nature, in that users and consumers of social media contents are diverse and from all across the world. Uploading contents on African culture – values, lifestyle, dressing, arts, music, food, etc, on social media afford the world to see and appreciate the various aspects of African cultures. Such information get into discussions and writings thus making for the perpetuation of the culture.

Social media has enhanced more than ever better the opportunity for African countries to make their own socio-cultural statements. In the words of Ohiagu (2010), social media can help African society develop, enrich and preserve its own cultural values and ensure that it is conspicuously represented in the emerging global culture.

An example of utilising the social media for global display of African culture is Nigerian Events and Aso-ebi – an Instagram account solely dedicated to the display of Nigerian traditional wedding attires made with Ankara, Aso-Oke and different local fabrics. This page has thousands of followers (one of the writers is a follower) giving them opportunity to see various styles and appreciate the Nigerian culture and fabric. From these sites, people replicate the styles for their own use; and in turn making for the sustenance of an aspect of the African culture.

The use of social media for the display for African styles and dresses has led to the infusion of African prints and materials in the designs of foreign clothes designers. Designers now use African materials to make fabulous attires that are displayed on runways and sold around the globe. This definitely will help in sustaining the African culture.

2. Archive for Cultural Materials: Being a mass medium that is not transient, social media can be a repository or archive for African cultural materials thus enabling the sustenance of the culture. Contents on social media are available 24 hours a day; 7 days a week and users have the opportunity of viewing previous content on a site any time. This will mean that social media sites, pages or accounts that are dedicated to African culture displaying - videos, poems, literature, drama, music, images - can be stored and accessed anytime, even in many years to come.

3. Creating virtual cultural and ethnic communities: Social media builds close interactions among users. It facilitates greater connectedness among users of the same ethnic group; reinforces existing ethnic links and ties. Poster (2010) in Bainum puts it this way “internet use also have the effect of linking together web users with the same ethnicity, into a tightly knit online community.”

Africans who use social media can create pages displaying African culture. This would offer users in other parts of the world and Africans raised outside the continent a window to fully appreciate Africa and its culture/values/heritage. Today there are now pages displayed in African languages. For example, Google Yoruba, Hausa and Igbo. There are specific groups and handles on Facebook and Twitter that communicate with their members and followers in African languages. This helps to strengthen the language and keep it alive; and overall, helping to sustain the African culture alongside Western culture.

In online dialogue, individuals can consciously project African culture. Users can sometimes make posts and comments on Facebook wall and other social media in their local languages. Use African idioms, proverbs, tales and myths that are peculiar to their ethnic group. These build virtual African communities at the same time expressing African culture. The social media thus serve as a channel to display and introduce users to different ethnicity/cultures as well as sustain these ethnic and cultural values and strengthen the ties between users of the same ethnicity.

4. Tapping Social Media’s Multi-media nature. Social media is multi-media in nature, that is, it allows for written, graphic, pictorial and video elements to be uploaded and shared on it. With this feature of social media, plays, images, skits on different aspects of African culture can be portrayed. Examples are drama on family values, short documentary on preparing an African dish.

Conclusion

Africa's rich cultural heritage is diverse, unique and should not be watered down and possibly fade into extinction. The social media, which is seen as posing threats to African culture, also holds much potential in projecting and sustaining African cultures. With its high capability for information storage and dissemination and interactive nature, users can become acquainted, understand and appreciate different aspects of the African culture thus making for its continuity.

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