

GIVING VOICE TO THE PEOPLE: EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF NEW MEDIA ON STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN THE NIGERIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

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Abstract

Given Nigeria's authoritarian and undemocratic governance (until her recent experimentation with democratic governance), workers rights and welfare have been pushed to the margin. This has given a bad taste of long drawn-out conflict and stakeholder deadlock. However, the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), which is the umbrella body that solicits the rights, interest and welfare of workers in Nigeria, has been vibrant in its efforts to bring greater stakeholder participation and interest representation in trade union movement. With the new wave of democratic process gaining increasing momentum, workers' rights and the dialectics of participatory and engaging trade unionism can be accelerated given the increased discourse space that this medium affords. This paper takes its strength from this departure and demonstrates (as shall be exemplified presently) how the new media can be instrumental in widening workers' participation, which can potentially leverage the overall efforts to enhance stakeholder engagement in this sector. In addition, this process can also add to the attempts to bring more responsible governance in Nigeria's new-fangled democracy as government retreats. Finally, trade union discourse can be deepened for greater agitation and protection of workers' rights in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, Trade Union Movement, Stakeholder Theory, New Media, Inclusive Engagement, Empowerment

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the effects of new media in trade union movement in Nigeria. It is expected that an essential contribution of this paper to trade union debate in Nigeria, is the particular way it argues that trade unionism can be advanced via new media for inclusive and democratic engagement between the Nigerian government and the members of Nigeria Labour Congress (stakeholders) (Fajana, 2006; Nwagbara, Pidomson & Nwagbara, 2013). The way in which this paper will be deepening government-trade union debate is by using the new media to achieve this. To the best of my knowledge this is the first paper that is exploring the nexus between trade union agitation, workers' rights and Nigeria's recent romance with democracy. It is to this end that this paper will be offering in bold relief the capacity of new media – new technology – to advance workers' rights including deepening the dialectics of stakeholder engagement in Nigeria. Recent studies have indicated that new media is a potent instrument in

redressing governance gaps as well as a platform for advancing rights protection (Nwagbara et al, 2013; Youngs, 2010; Cox, 2013).

This capacity of new media to engender rights advocacy, increased corporate-stakeholder engagement and to advance governance gaps has been documented widely in extant literature on trade unionism and corporate governance as well as corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Whittall et al, 2009). Of particular reference is Jenson et al (2009) where in the new media technologies where clearly elaborated as having the potentialities to challenge the identity and conducts of politicians and public (and civil) officers; while enabling them at the same time to perceive also benefits from the new shifts – which can help them sharpen their understanding of the effect of this new capabilities on their usual roles- which is the awareness that the old bureaucratic approach has no response to the threats of transparency posed by the open nature of the new media technology (Kaganer & Vast, 2010). From the view point of Gelders et al (2010), the rise of new media technology represents a significant tool for educating, organizing as well as democratizing information dissemination and sharing which can help strengthen collaboration, solidarity and collective action. And this fits well with the imperatives of converging spontaneous citizen-driven activities which can help check leadership conducts as well as fostering inclusive governance.

The new media technology is seen as a means of liberation and democratic freedom which enables reaching global audience outside government and traditional censorship, and it also can facilitate enabling platform for disseminating materials online via weblogs, mailing lists and videos which can be used to coordinate social movement. And these potentialities have been demonstrated on number of occasions such as in the case of 'Free Tibet' campaign which have captured the attention of the public across the globe and essentially- the recent 'Arab spring' which has led to the ousting of number of dictatorial leaders to mention just few (Korotayev & Zinkina, 2011; Lynch, 2012). According to scholars, the new media technology has the capacity to aid the actualization of democratic platform that accommodates the participation of all citizens in democratic, social and employment discourse - irrespective of hierarchical considerations (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). This is what Obeidat (2012) considers as the relationship between information systems (new media) and the management of human capital – which has attained the level of inseparability. Again, the significant of the new media technology which is said to be propelled by globalisation, should engender the Nigerian industrial relation and the trade unionism to embark on the reinvention of new media technology to further sustainable commitment in this sector

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: INDUSTRIAL RELATION AND THE RISE OF TRADE UNIONISM IN NIGERIA

Globally, the evolution of industrial relations is said to be a chequered one mediated by government-labour crisis and employee dissatisfaction; this is increasingly becoming a prevalent phenomenon in paid employment including human relations (Kaufman, 2004, p. 1). In Nigeria in particular, it is worth noting that the initial stage of industrial experience in Nigeria is fraught with controversy and tempestuous history that finds expression in unjust working conditions, marginalisation of workers' rights, and exclusion of workers' voice in engagement process as well as a plethora of issues, which make government-labour relations rather controversial. Consequentially, this has created a work environment characterised by conflict of interests, marginalisation of workers' rights and interests and a state of siege (Fajana, 2006; Onyeonoro, 2005; Fashoyin, 1992).

Part of this situation is essentially forged by the ascendancy of the military in Nigerian government and a prolonged history of her warped political process (Obi, 2010; Omotola, 2010; Nwagbara, 2011). Nigeria's political history is replete with scholarly efforts and researches that suggest the need to rethink government-workers relations in Nigeria for more inclusive and cordial relationship. As this paper argues, this process will chime with giving voice to the 'voiceless'. In educating some clarity here, as the topic being investigated shows, the term 'voiceless' as used in this paper connotes one segment of stakeholders (that is the workers) aside the government, whose participation in engagement process is stifled by the powers that be. The political and labour movement of Nigeria foreshadows the exclusion of these people (stakeholders) in Nigeria's labour relations (Mordi et al, 2011; Fajana, 2006; Otobo, 2006; Nwagbara, Pidomson and Nwagbara, 2013).

The emergence of Nigerian industrial relation gave birth to the evolution of Trade union movement, which remains an issue of debate amongst commentators in terms of the exact time unionism actively kicked off in Nigeria. Apparently, credit has been given to the 1912 Southern Nigerian Civil Service Union as the first union movement to officially emerge in Nigeria, and this has become a pivot for the formation of other movements before Nigeria's independence in 1960. This process ultimately brought about the rise of unionism, with the rise of over 1000 mushroom bodies in this league by 1975. Following the 1976 intervention by the Government due to the unions' polarisation and ideological divide, a new composition of unions came to be, which brought about 42 industrial unions in 1977 in order to facilitate formation of labour centres given the complexity of the then multiple labour centres. Consequently, in 1978 Nigeria Labour Congress was officially established, this body was subsequently affiliated with the unions. Trade unions were further restructured in 1989 from 42 to 29, and further

attempt was made by the Obasanjo administration in 2004 to facilitate further extension of labour centres (Ubeku, 1983; Ananaba, 1969; fashoyin, 1992; Fajana, 2006).

Based on the core norms of the 1973 act, trade unionism is alliance of groups with common interest that is geared towards better working condition for employees – including improved welfare and decent wages as well as security for retirement in the future (Ogbeifun, 2011). Trade Unionism in Nigeria involves the combination of different unions in concerted efforts to give voice to “voiceless” employees or workers in a bid to improving their working conditions and other issues that relate improved engagement and inclusion. In fleshing this out, according to Ademiluyi and Imhonopi (2010) trade union movement represents the voice of the muffled voice, which arguably is a poster child of the unheard. In Nigeria, the need to reconceptualise giving voice to the “voiceless” particular via the instrumentality of new media engagement and strategies is crying for attention and more scholarship in this direction. However, in light of the trade union determination and continued effort to consolidate relevance and to be vibrant in relation to the new vista of opportunity presented by the new media technology, there seems to be advantages that can be derived from this process. This can potentially galvanise a renewed struggle for an inclusive and empowering trade union participation that is premised on greater openness and level playing field, which will chime with distributed communicative network model of trade union engagement (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). Again, this can have the attractive graces of sustainable trade union movement as well as accountability from the employers of labour. Thus, as this paper suggests the envisioned landscape can be an important building block in recasting industrial relations matters, which are at the moment in the shadow of government vice-grip. Some of the ways in which this can be materialised include gainful collective struggle for the actualization of employees’ right, wellbeing and better pay (Tai, 2009; Fajana, 2006). To this end, it can be gleaned from the ongoing discussion that early movement of trade unionism has played a significant role in the struggle for independence and democratic process in Nigeria (Toyo, 1966).

In the same vein, the evolution of new media connotes the term interactivity. This concept entails stretching Internet availability, media mobilization and convergence, which can propel the progression of ‘many to many’ form of web-based mass communication, which is a departure from the traditional ‘one-to-many’ approach to mass communication (Flew, 2002). This resonates with the concept of effective interactivity as adumbrated by the use of new media systems – given that it accommodates stakeholders’ views in relation to the state, government or employers of labour. To offer clarity, effective interactivity is a process that mediates rapid, timely, unhindered and democratised methods of engagement and communication grounded on the anvil of new technology. In light of this background,

new media technology can has the capacity of ensuring sharing and dissemination of knowledge that is crucial for government-stakeholder management and relations. In Youngs' (2010) contention, this is vital for organisational growth and productivity mediated by legitimacy. The issue of legitimacy here is necessary since organisations rely on public approval to exist (Suchman, 1995). And stakeholder participation in trade union discourse and matters elicits societal approval, a metonym for legitimacy. This is the hub of new media as considered in this paper. In order to avoid redundant expression, again, this process is pregnant with giving voice to the "voiceless". Equally, the advancement of new media technology is increasingly facilitating organisational efficiency and competitive edge in the age described by Drucker (1986) as knowledge economy. In the knowledge economy, information dissemination and sharing for "learning organisation" dialectics is critical. Peter Senge (1990) in his erudite book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation* described this phenomenon as the ability of organisations and people – in this context stakeholders in the Nigerian industrial relations – to take cognisance of new ways of improving things organisationally.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Rapid and instantaneous dissemination of information and sharing is heralded by greater stakeholder criticism and clamour, which are fostered by the emergence of new media technology (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). Given the continuing holler from stakeholders for greater stakeholder engagement and inclusion in sustainable relationship discourse as well as giving voice to the 'voiceless', the conceptual framework of this paper is based on the historical analysis of unionism in Nigeria and workers rights. It also includes the interface of trade unionism and new media with particular focus on the capacity of new media adoption by the Nigerian Labour Congress to advance stakeholder engagement in Nigeria. Thus, new media can be used to advance this in the contemporary era when information technology is a veritable tool in advancing workers' right and sustainable engagement. Therefore, as the topic under investigation indicates, giving voice to the 'voiceless' can be achieved by deepening methods, strategies and platforms through which the stakeholders (NLC members and the public) can foster distributed engagement. Therefore, the strength of this paper is lodged in the possibility of bringing change in government-trade union engagement through new media for a democratic and collegial engagement amongst these stakeholders (Macintosh & Whyte, 2008). A lot of scholarship has explored this process but from not from empirical perspectives; even some that do this from this angle have not taken time to factors in the energies of new media in this light. Thus, this is the first paper (to the best of the author) that interrogates this conjuncture as has been foreshadowed earlier. This is therefore where this paper anchors its strength.

4. METHODOLOGY

Given the difficulties encountered by various researchers on developing countries (Opkara & Wynn, 2007), one of the best and fruitful ways of getting data in this context is telephone interview. Specifically, this paper adopted a semi-structured interview procedure to get rich data (Silverman, 2006) for analysing as well as drawing inference from the data in consonance with the overall aim and objectives of this paper. This strategy of collating and collecting data in development studies researches frames the method adopted in this paper for data collection.

Attempting to conduct most non-standardised interviews by telephone may offer potential advantages associated with access, speed, and lower cost. This method may allow you to make contact with participants with whom it would be impractical to conduct an interview on a face-to-face basis because of the distance and prohibitive costs involved and time required (Saunders et al, 2009, p. 342).

In this direction, this paper adopted the above strategy which culminated in interviewing eleven (11) interviewees (participants) over the phone. The 11 people interviewed via the telephone offered insights into how new media can impact trade unionism in Nigeria as shall be demonstrated shortly. The likert scale below graphically depicts the responses from the 11 interviewed participants whose opinion matter in this context. These are 3 executive members of Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC), 4 principle managers of the organisation, 1 corporate secretary, 1 publicity secretary and 2 ordinary members.

The strategy used was mainly purposive sampling (Saunders, 2009). Purposive sampling is a research technique used particularly in qualitative data collection, analysis and interpretation, where the researcher chooses a specific sample based on the methodology adopted. This process also factors in the sample frame, which can help bring to the fore thesis statement of such research. Thus, “purposive sampling or judgemental sampling enables you to use your judgement to select cases that will best enable you to answer your research question(s) and to meet your objectives” (Saunders, 2009, p. 230). Therefore, the logic of this research tool in the context of this paper was to ascertain the views that can align the paper’s aim to the methodological and conceptual standpoints adopted for coherent and logical analysis and conclusion in the final analysis. Thus, the methodology adopted in this paper is essentially interview, which was done over the telephone. In order to ensure inclusiveness, the interviewees, which include key people in the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) Lagos Nigeria, which is the headquarters of NLC, were polled to ascertain their views on how new media can potentially engender greater workers’ rights and involvement, which is pertinent in achieving the overall aim and objectives of this paper. In

this direction, questions were asked ranging from sustainability, workers right, new media and advocacy, strategies of workers’ engagement, methods of disseminating inclusive dialogue, inclusive engagement and protection of labour unions’ rights, among others. However, after these questions were asked and responses taken into account, efforts were made to thematise the perspectives offered by the interviewees for easy and more pragmatic data analysis. In order to achieve this, these various perspectives to questions asked the interviewees were thematised. This process is what has been characterised as condensing data, which has been variously documented in management and research literatures as capable of fostering manageable and pragmatic data analysis (Silverman, 2006). The four broad factors in which the interviewees’ responses were subsumed are: new media, workers’ rights, sustainable relationship and ‘voiceless’ engagement.

In analysing data collated, Likert Scale was used. The Likert Scale is usually used in research and inquiry to show levels of salience. The Likert Scale utilise a series of numbers ranging from 1 to 5. And usually a scale of 1 shows lowest level of salience; while 5 is the highest. See Ffigure 1 in this regard.

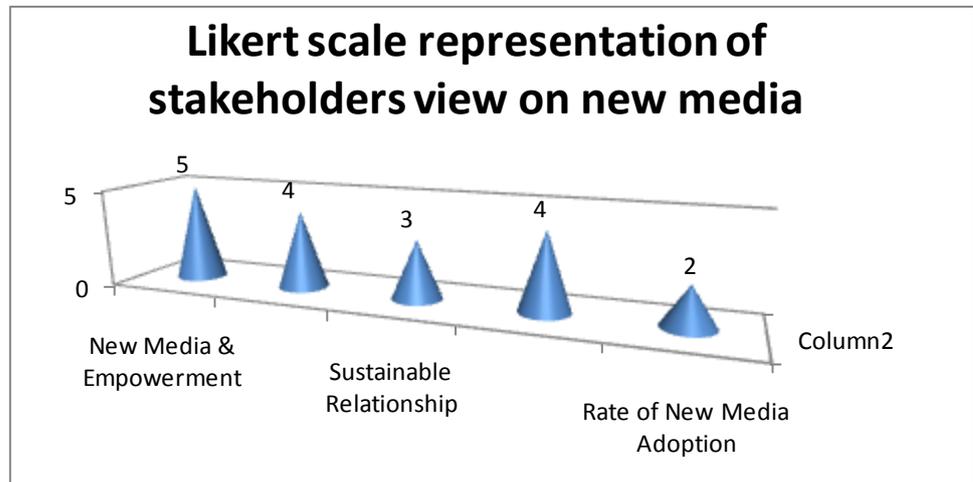


FIGURE 1 -A RANGE OF STAKEHOLDER VIEWS
Source: The Researcher, 2013

Therefore the need to use descriptive statistics to illustrate as well as analyse the foregoing becomes imperative in order to depict pictorially and empirically how this current paper comes to its conclusion. In this direction, the former is framed by the later in a way that orchestrates a coherent and logical analysis of all the issues discussed in this paper. Thus, as can be seen above (Fig. 1), there is broadened awareness in the Nigerian trade unionism about the potential of the new media technology to advance and engender workers’ empowerment, workers advocacy and sustainable relationship in the workplace. This process can bring improved engagement, which can impact on giving voice to the ‘voiceless’ in the

Nigerian trade union movement. In analysing data here, given that there are high response rates: 5 (New media and empowerment), 4 (Workers' rights advocacy) and 4 (giving voice to stakeholders) respectively on the Likert scale, it can be surmised that this is an indication of increased awareness amongst stakeholders on the capacity or potential of new media to advance better engagement. However, based on the response rate for sustainable relationship among stakeholders and unions' use of new media which are 3 (sustainable relationship) and 2 (Rate of new media adoption) respectively, it can be gleaned that more needs to be done. This insight will provoke the unions to fully tap into the energies of the new media in order to widen the discursive space for better and inclusive engagement. Also, this is pertinent for a wholesome and sustainable relationship amongst union members and the government. This imagined situation grounded on the anvil of mediated stakeholder engagement is central to the aim of this paper which borders on ways voice can be given to the 'voiceless'.

5. NEW MEDIA AND TRADE UNIONISM: PROSPECTING FOR INCREASED WORKERS' VOICE

Central to sustainable engagement in the Nigerian trade unionism is new media technology as has been illuminated earlier. Thus, in light of information gap that sparks credibility problems and stakeholder criticisms, it is critical for trade union relations with respect to stakeholder engagement to involve the collection, aggregation, storing, managing and disseminating of inclusive debate for stakeholder voice amplification (Adeyanju, 2012, p. 20; Youngs, 2010). In addition to creating a sense of trust and organisations' commitment to sustainable development, this can also enhance the development of some intangible assets including positive corporate image in the Nigeria industrial relation (Achua, 2008). It has been argued that new media is an equaliser of information dissemination and sharing including a platform for de-centralising cultural artefact possession. To this end, the new media technology has been defined as

... the "magic" of the Internet [new media] is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolisations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralises the position of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production (My parenthesis, Payton & Kvasny, 2012, p. 83).

From the above it may be concluded that, new media is at the heart of sustainable method of information gathering, storing, management and dissemination/sharing that are important for trade union movement in Nigeria to advance its sustainable development commitment. This is at the heart of democratising industrial relations in Nigeria and giving voiced to employees to be part of decision-

making mechanism that can mean to their welfare (Fajana, 2006; Nwagbara, Pidomson & Nwagbara, 2013). Given the heightened stakeholder pressure and increased premium placed on the importance of sustainable engagement and accountability in the Nigerian industrial relations, Nigerian trade union movement is taking on a framework aimed at increasing the momentum and acceleration of efforts in the employment sector to increase the voice of the “voiceless”. This process is synonymous with prospecting for widening the discursive space, which is a harbinger of recognising the rights and views of other stakeholder for sustainable relationship building and nurturing.

Therefore, the adoption and utilisation of new media or social media such as Facebook and Twitter as well as blogs by both government or employers of labour and trade union members in Nigeria can be potent in accelerating the envisioned wave of increased workers’ voice. In taking this debate further in their book *The Social Construction of Disability in New Media*, Goggin & Newell (2003) defined new media as

“... new digital communications technologies that include the Internet and broadband networks (fast high-capacity data services), advanced telecommunications networks (offering services such as caller ID, digital mobile phones, third-generation mobile telecommunications, video telephones), and digital broadcasting ...” (p. xiii).

These “networks” as indicated above are capable of signalling “grassroots movement that may sow the seeds for new forms of ... public discourse, interactivity, and online communities ... more credible than traditional media” (Ko, Yin & Kuo, 2008, p. 542).

In a similar contention, Nwagbara (2013) posited that “[T]he accelerated rate of ... advocacy by Nigerians ... made possible by social media is reshaping how” (p.693) how engagement is conceptualised and reworked in Nigeria, a condition precipitated hugely by the logic of new media technology. Thus, one of new media platforms, blog as has been noted has the capacity to increase the ascendancy of re-conceptualised labour union movement, which panders to the allure of individualised and empowering labour-government relations. Thus,

[B]logs on mainstream media sites could certainly be regarded as an indication of a modified public sphere approach, integrating new forms of horizontal (individualised) engagement with more traditional ... forms. ... The hybrid role of established media in combining their traditional ‘mass’ (vertical) role with new (horizontal) forms, including blogging, is one of the most notable developments of new media era (Youngs, 2009, p. 133).

The public sphere referred above is in the Habermasian sense, a site that brings private and public interests together for democratised debate and inclusive labour participation. In addition, the Habermasian public sphere dialectics can potentially widen, amplify and de-territorialise engagement formats and configuration. Here lies the rhetoric of giving voice to the “voiceless”, which are stakeholders in the Nigerian government-union relations.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In sum, this paper argues that a sustainable government-trade union engagement can be precipitated by new media, which has the potential to drive better engagement as affords stakeholder the needed platform to engage in inclusive debate and trouble-free relations. This is critical to enhancing workers' rights, increased stakeholder relations and transparent engagement and in the final analysis democratic culture. This in effect may not only help transcend challenges facing Nigeria's labour issues such as industrial disputes, incessant strikes and the like, which are major impediment to industrial relations in Nigeria. This envisioned process will impact positively on organisational productivity and workers' commitment. With the new wave of democratisation gaining increased momentum in Nigeria as has been demonstrated in the preceding part of this work, it can be gleaned that an effective trade union movement mediated by new media is very necessary for national bliss. In addition, this will facilitate a movement towards giving voice to the “voiceless” in the Nigerian labour relations and trades union movement.

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