

Promoting Children's Rights Through the New Media: The Nigerian Experience

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ABSTRACT The mass media has been used extensively for promoting child rights and development agenda in Nigeria largely through media advocacy and public sensitisation campaigns. However, the emergence of the new media has heralded new opportunities for expanding media mobilisation for child development interventions in the country. Using a human rights analytical perspective, the paper argues that the new media holds considerable prospects for empowering young people to becoming informed and active advocates of their rights while reducing the tokenism that has characterised their engagement in child rights advocacy programming. Deployed appropriately, new media tools are essential in promoting access to, and utilisation of key health and social services needed for the fulfilment of children rights. But other experts have cautioned against 'cyber utopianism and internet-centricism' in relation to the role of new media in social and political development. The new media also comes with considerable challenges especially related to some of their dysfunctional effects which need further research and analysis. The paper proposes a symbiotic relationship between the 'new' and the 'old' media in dealing with entrenched forms of child rights violations in order to achieve cultural, systemic and policy changes needed for maximum realisation of children's rights.

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of mass communication channels in promoting human rights education is well recognized and documented in the literature. Among others, Bhandari (2005) and Jonsson (2003) argue for substantial media mobilisation in contributing to the human rights agenda, specifically the promotion of children's rights. International development institutions also emphasise the critical importance of the mass media in enhancing supportive a public attitude to human rights issues. In 1978, UNESCO came up with a Declaration on the fundamental contribution of the mass media to the promotion of human rights and other aspects of international peace and understanding. Article IV states that media institutions are critical in educating young people towards promoting the spirit of peace, justice, freedom, mutual respect as well as facilitating the realization of human rights of all peoples and nations (UNESCO 1978).

Within contemporary international development, the framework for holistically addressing children's needs and concerns is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Its 54 Articles embody the fundamental human rights for children, including the principles of inclusion, equality and participation all of children. Article 17 establishes the importance of media engagement in promoting children's rights

and recommends access to information material from a diversity of national and international sources (CRC1989). To address the peculiarities of child development in Africa, the African Child Rights Charter provides the normative framework and minimum standards for child rights in Africa. It also supports the need for effective mass media mobilisation in promoting the rights of the African child (Kamchedzera 1999). From the foregoing, there is a general recognition of the critical role of mass communication in improving human rights consciousness within the general population, and especially for promoting the child rights agenda. Against this background, this paper examines the promise and potential of the new media in promoting the child rights agenda in Nigeria. The paper argues that the various new media platforms offer considerable opportunities for achieving three main elements of child rights agenda: child participation, service provision and protection of young people.

Statistics on the scope of new media use in Nigeria varies and is constantly changing. Ndukwe (2005) estimates that in 2000, Nigeria had 450,000 connected fixed lines, no connected digital mobile lines, one national carrier and one licensed mobile line operator. Internet World Statistics also estimates that Nigeria had 200,000 fixed line connections by December 2004 but the figure grew to 1.5 million in 2007

and 11 million in 2009. Today over 44 million people are accessing the internet in the country. In terms of demographics, children and teenagers (7-18 years) constitute over 32% of internet users. Another survey conducted in 2009 indicated that the internet is most popular among 20-24 years in the country (Longe and Longe 2009). SocialBakers (2011) estimates the number of Facebook users in Nigeria as 3.1 million (April 2011) with 37% of users from age 18-24 and 7% from age 13-17 years. It is apparent that adolescents and young people are the highest producers and consumers of information in the new media. As a conceptual framework for this analysis, the next section provides a short literature review on the promise and problems of new media in society.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK – PROS AND CONS OF NEW MEDIA IN SOCIETY

The new media is a generic terminology for ICT platforms characterised by the convergence of computer and telecommunication technologies (Olise 2008). This comprises what has been referred to as new media technologies, social media, and web-based applications. In some cases, it is specifically tagged Web 2.0 media, including the use of different micro and macro blogs, social bookmarking, wikis, photo/presentation sharing, and syndication services (Lefebvre 2007). It is characterised by the utilisation of various communication formats such images, video, text, and audio and driven by the combination of communication and information technology through the internet (Lasica 2003). Some of the features of the new media are decentralisation and democratisation of information resources, enhanced dialogues, and erosion of traditional gate-keeping and agenda-setting functions (Chaffee and Metzger 2001). Other peculiarities are interactivity, speed, user generated content, and multi-directionality of information (Waters 2011). As an offshoot of the ‘information explosion’ and the new ‘information society’ phenomenon, the new media ushers in what has been described as ‘we media’ or ‘participatory media’ generation, in which those who are traditionally referred to as ‘audiences’ in communication studies have become significant ‘participants’ in the news and information process. The combination of these characteristics

has resulted in the optimism that the new media is creating a ‘new ecosystem’ (Wilson and Murby 2010).

Proponents of the new media view it with considerable optimism on many fronts. From a marketing perspective, Gillin (2009) refers to them as “new influencers” because of their role in creating brands and promoting engagement of corporate organisations and their clients in ways never experienced before. This stems from their pervasiveness and ability to facilitate new approaches of connecting business with clients. According to Blanchard (2011), in a globalised age it is imperative for commercial organisations to maximise the power of the ‘social media and viral technologies to supercharge customer service’. Within the domain of politics, the new media, especially social media has become critical tools for ‘improbable victory’, especially in view of their role in contributing to the success of President Obama election, which was largely attributed to digital influence (Harfoush 2009).

The optimistic disposition on the new media in politics and marketing has also been transferred to health and social development. Some digital communication experts and development organisations argue that the new media could play a major role in social development interventions. For example, an analysis on the use of social media within the UN context notes that the integration of web and mobile technologies can transform the monologue associated with traditional broadcast media into social dialogue with potentials of promoting the democratisation of information. Ultimately, this is expected to transform various categories of people from content consumers to content producers (United Nations 2010). It is also argued that through multiple platforms, including text, images, audio, and video, the new media is capable of promoting public engagement for social development.

Wilson and Murby (2010:33) argue that the merger of social media and communication into a new media is changing a vital part of life. They argue that with so many people “blogging, tweeting, uploading, downloading, crowd-sourcing, wiki-ing, linking in, geo-referencing, i-chatting, skypeing, flipping, videotaping and many more” a new social enterprise is being facilitated. The US Centre for Disease Control (CDC 2010) agrees with this conclusion because of the

possibilities offered by the new media in providing access to credible and science-based health information systems that reach new audiences in dimensions never experienced before.

Arguing for a new perspective on target audience within the context of new media, Lefebvre (2007: 32-33) suggests that the new technology offers new opportunities for health promotion professionals in engaging with their patients, customers and audiences through new media formats. He also hypothesises that the new media signals a shift in thinking about traditional methods of social marketing and communication for development. McNab (2009: 1) notes that more than any time in history, social media offers timely, accessible and credible health information critical for improving public health outcomes with 'more people, more quickly and directly'. In the area of advocacy and activism, Brodock et al. (2009) found that digital activism has increased because of improved economic capability and access to multiple social media platforms. The authors argue that with increased access to various new media formats, more people are becoming digital activists and mobilising public will for diverse social actions and issues.

On the other hand, several commentators treat the new media with caution and scepticism because of the weak evidence of their impact on social and political development. Lefebvre (2011) identified what he calls major 'fictions' on the use of social media for health, including the fact that new media is uniform, that users are prepared to be changed through the use of their platforms and that every social issue is amenable to new media influence. Specifically, Jessen (2008) argues that YouTube is a source of health misinformation. While noting that the internet helps in cultivating a new level of knowledge and health-seeking behaviour in clients, the author concludes that the internet also contains an equal or greater amount of misinformation. In his analysis on 'the dumbest generation', Beuerlein (2009:15) challenges the notion that the new media improves education and argues that some aspects of the new media have negative effects on the educational attainment of users, especially young people. To him the cyber culture 'stupefies young Americans' and turns them into 'know nothings'. Another major problem is in relation to the abuse of children through various new media formats and

tools. Evidence from different countries have shown that apart from access to inappropriate content for specific age groups, young people are victims of cyber crimes such as cyber-bullying, internet addiction, and internet crimes against children (Longe and Longe 2009).

Within the context of political development and change, Morozov (2011) cautions against what he calls 'cyber utopianism and internet-centrism'. According to him, the expectation of digital utopians that the internet would drive political change in a number of authoritarian countries has not taken place. However, this finding seems contrary to extant political changes in the Arab world, which many social commentators have argued was fuelled and promoted by the new media. While some observers have referred to it as the 'twitter revolution' (Mainwaring 2011), others have dismissed the role of the new media in the process (Gladwell 2011), concluding that social media cannot cause a revolution. The role of technology as a major driver of social change, national development and organisational development is well established (Ikpe and Olise 2010; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006), but a critical point needs to be made that people, more than technology are the drivers of change.

To sum up the conceptual context, the convergence of computer and telecommunication technologies into the new media platform has radically shifted many aspects of life, necessitating the need to learn and use them much more effectively in the society. But issues around their dysfunctions need to be taken into cognizance. Just as other media have their functions and dysfunctions, so it is with the new media. And while the optimism on the power of the new media is understood, the scepticism also has its place. A balanced analytical lens is needed in understanding and appreciating its role in development and for the promotion of human rights agenda in particular.

3. NEW MEDIA AND CHILD RIGHTS PROMOTION IN NIGERIA

Field interventions in the application of the new media for child rights promotion point to some considerable progress, but there are challenges too. For illustrative purposes, a few examples are presented below in line with the human rights analytical framework adopted in

the study: participation rights, provision of service and protection rights (Verghellen 1999).

3.1. New Media and Participation Rights

Conceptually, participation rights cover freedom of expression, freedom of association, and citizenship and holistic engagement of children. According to Article 12 (1) of CRC: "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child." While there are several opportunities for children's participation in the country, some traditional and institutional practices hinder the full enjoyment of this right. These include household dynamics, cultural practices, perception of children as always childish, suspicion of the notion of participation as a foreign idea, lack of a conducive environment for self expression and institutional forces (Save the Children 2010; RIATT 2010). In addition, many of the interventions that promote child participation in development contexts (such as using children for poetry recital, dances and for waving to high level dignitaries) are tokenistic, window dressing, manipulative and decorative (Beers et al. 2006). From a theory of participation, this falls within the lower level of the ladder of participation, which, indeed, is non-participation (Lansdown 2001).

But the era of new media offers a major opportunity for promoting participation rights of children and young people. One of the projects that enhanced participation is Voices of Youth (VOY), a platform that gives voice to youths on social issues. VOY is a global child participation project covering 35 countries including Nigeria. It is dedicated to harnessing the educational and community building potential of internet technology in promoting child rights principles. Since its inception in 1995, children and adolescents in various parts of the country are able to connect, dialogue and network with other children in the world. Through the VOY project, 'children are able to know more, say more, and do more' via the new media (UNICEF 2005:1). A rural version has been added to this programme resulting in RVOY which supports children and young people in rural areas through SMS, games, video, storytelling, email,

and other forms of online communication integrated into local media to promote their participation rights. With online dialogues, the contributions of rural voices are fed into national and international discussions. A preliminary assessment of the intervention confirmed that the new media contributed to some level of empowerment of rights holders to becoming 'chief advocates' of their rights. It also strengthened advocacy efforts with them, and by them, not necessarily for them, as in the past. The use of the new media accentuated the voice and the image of the children with more children being seen and heard, different from traditional context where children can only be seen and not heard (Oluseyi 2010) VOY facilitated significant freedom of association, networking and consultation via various social media formats. It promoted freedom of expression, as young people had an unfettered freedom to express themselves in their own language, on their own terms and at the times of their choosing. Third, to a great extent it strengthened their empowerment as active citizens and as advocates of their rights. In addition, the new media contributed to the narrowing of the digital divide between rural and urban youth with respect to their participation rights.

However, a number of commentators have identified some limitations in the approach. Azeez (2011) argues that 90% of Nigerian young people do not have access to ICT peripherals. This implies that they are unable to effectively maximise their participation rights through new media. Second, genuine and effective participation is not only a function of having access to the technology for communication. Other variables, such as what it is used for and the intended and unintended consequences of use are important too. Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) acknowledge that children and young person's use of new media is for entertainment, for chatting and for social networking, rather than other uses that can enhance their citizenship and holistic development. This begs the question around 'participation for what' which has been widely discussed in the literature on participation (Lansdown 2001; Bhandari 2005; Jonsson 2003; Beers et al. 2006). This author also acknowledges the difficulty of children's participation in public governance and policy influence in many African countries. Although the use of new media for child participation is per-

ceived as an emerging element of engagement with policy makers, the real impact is yet to be seen.

3.2. New Media and the Provision of Service for Children

Provision of services is one of the fundamental rights in the child rights agenda. Among others, it encapsulates the provision of health, nutrition and education services. In contemporary communication for development practice, many development agencies are now using the new media to promote service provision for child health and development. For example, the Nigerian government and various development partners have initiated the Rapid SMS programme for child survival and maternal health. In collaboration with private sector organisations, the RapidSMS initiative is promoting maternal newborn and child health, the use of bednets for malaria prevention, vaccine logistics management, and birth registration. The advantages of the intervention include effective service delivery, tracking, monitoring and delivery of supplies which are essential for service uptake. A similar intervention has been undertaken in a number of African countries. In Rwanda, field experience showed that RapidSMS provided real-time access to details on maternal and child health. With RapidSMS it was possible to reach hard-to-reach pregnant women and address the challenges of child survival. Also, with internet-enabled database facilitates, it was possible to track the situation of maternal and child care and provide prompt service delivery (Nwaigwe 2010).

Another example in Nigeria of the use of new media for service provision is around HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health counselling services. Under the leadership of an NGO, "Education as a Vaccine", HIV prevention education is being intensified for out-of-school youth in Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Kaduna, and Gombe States through the use of social media, SMS platforms and helpline mobile phone services. The project is aimed at generating disaggregated data on the provision of information, skills and services via the accessed platforms of voice call, SMS and other social media platforms. Expected results include improvement in HIV comprehensive knowledge and uptake of sexual and reproductive health

services of at least 80,000 adolescents and young people aged 15–24 years. This will ultimately contribute to reducing their vulnerability to HIV and AIDS (UNICEF 2010). Within the domain of educational services, some State governments in Nigeria have begun initiatives that provide numeracy, literacy and other services in education through the new media. The eLearning initiative of Rivers State involves the use of ICT and multimedia online educational services for providing contemporary education for some primary and secondary schools in the State.

A critical assessment by this author is that the reality is far from the rhetoric. In many parts of the country, the scope and penetration of these interventions are still limited. In addition there are many challenges in service delivery for child survival that are beyond the deployment of new media. UNICEF (2008, 2007) estimates that child and infant mortality is a serious problem, with infant mortality rate standing at 86 per 1,000 live births, and under-five mortality rate of 191 per 1,000 live births. In many parts of the country children are malnourished with protein-energy malnutrition described as a 'silent emergency' due to food insecurity and poverty, among other factors. One-third of all children under-five years old are either stunted, underweight or wasted. More than 73,000 children are born with HIV each year, yet access to antiretroviral therapy is still low. Only one third of all schools have access to safe water. Sanitation coverage averages 70% in urban areas and 30% in rural areas. Diarrhoea is responsible for 16% of child deaths every year. Nearly 80% of children do not benefit from pre-primary education while violence against children in school contributes to school absenteeism. Therefore, the extent to which the new media can address these challenges is in doubt without integrating with other methods of mass mobilisation and strategic engagement. From a theory of behaviour and social change, the integration and use of multiple channels and approaches result in better social outcomes (Mefalopulos 2008; Maibach et al. 2007).

3.3. New Media and Protection Rights

A number of child rights articles emphasise the need for protection of children. These include protection from sexual exploitation, trafficking and pornography. Underlying the prin-

ciple of protection is the notion of the evolving capacity of children. According to Article 5 of the CRC "State Parties shall facilitate the enjoyment of rights in a manner consistent with the emerging capacity of the child". This concept has been recognised as critical to the balanced perspective embodied in the instrument. Lansdown (2005) argues that the need for children to be agents of their rights must be balanced with the imperative of their protection in accordance with their age and maturity. Most human rights experts agree on the principle, hence the notion of designing interventions that are age-appropriate and content specific (Beers et al. 2006; Jonnson 2003).

Field experiences demonstrate that the new media is being used to contribute to the protection agenda. The initiative on service provision cited earlier encapsulates the provision of birth registration which is considered as a fundamental element of protection. Ensuring that each child has a birth certificate is one of the components of child protection. In addition, many development agencies and NGOs in Nigeria are running social media and hotline projects that provide care and support for children and women who are victims or survivors of abuse, neglect and exploitation. Sesan (2005) reports that the National Information Society Campaigns organised in various parts of the country from 2003 to 2005 contributed to the empowerment and protection rights of young people. The campaigns involved the use of ICT for Development with special attention to youths in rural areas.

But empirical evidence suggests that this is a major challenging area. Longe et al. (2007) discovered an 'alarming trend' on the exposure of children (as young as 7-12 years) to internet pornography, an age band known to be least averse to taking steps to reduce its effect on them because of their impressionistic minds. An earlier study by Longe and Longe (2005) estimates that close to 10 million Nigerians visit pornographic sites a week: 40% focussing on sex sites and 60% distributed among searches such as academic, entertainment, migration and sports. With a high percentage of children (7-18 years) constituting over 32% of internet users, it is argued that this age group may be excessively exposed to internet pornography. There are reports in many parts of the world that young people are 'sexting' (sending sex related images)

instead of, or in addition to, texting. This demonstrates that access to and use of new media may in fact be contrary to some elements of the child rights agenda, especially the concept of emerging capacity of children. Via the new media, children and young people are exposed to materials that negate the spirit and the letter of some child rights principle. Although the ramification of this challenge in Nigeria is yet to be fully understood, it is certain that there is a need for more child protection measures in a digital age.

4. CHALLENGES

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that the new media is critical to promoting the child rights agenda in the country, but there are some challenges in the process. In addition to some of the specific issues mentioned above, the paper identifies four cross-cutting challenges.

First, child rights issues are complex and span multiple needs and manifold services. Many of the issues and problems facing children, especially in terms of rights violation, are entrenched and deep-seated within norms and culture requiring structural and systemic changes. Violation of children's rights pose serious challenges for the society and require strategic engagement across social, political, economic and institutional levels. We need 'new media plus' intervention to achieve success in this area.

Second, while the new media affords the opportunity for the promotion of participation and protection rights, it also manifests some dysfunctional effects in terms of exposing children and young people to information that may be potentially harmful to their holistic development. As already noted, the new media has heralded a new culture of cyber crimes that go against child rights. It is widely argued that the proliferation of computer technology and the internet has made the job of predators against the child easier, as children have become targets of internet-based crimes (Bauerlein 2009). In addition, there are concerns among psychologists and educators about the harmful impact of some aspects of the new media (especially excessive use for entertainment) on the cognitive, physical and social development of the children. This implies that the effect of new media on child rights needs to be continuously studied.

Third, there is currently inadequate programme guidance around new media use for, and with, young people. In view of the numerous ‘unknowns’ in the programming process, many child rights agencies are grappling with how to design and implement results-based interventions through new media for and with children on different rights issues. This programming imperative requires more attention by academics and development professionals alike.

Fourth, there is limited documentation on ‘what works’ in new media programming and child rights promotion. Documentation of evidence-based case studies and lessons learned is a major area of challenge in communication for development. Currently there is a dearth of empirical documentation on the application of new media for promoting human rights. Some of the programme documents from development agencies do not show trends and impact measurement.

5. CONCLUSION

The new media is an appropriate tool for all audience groups and is potentially useful in empowering children and young people to becoming digital activists by maximising inherent social interaction within the new media. There is also a consensus that, if used appropriately, the new media formats and platforms have a great promise for advocacy and media relations practices in Nigeria. By their nature, new media technologies are drivers of social change, national development and organisational development, a notion grounded in the technological determinism theory which postulates that technology has the power to drive human action and change (Ikpe and Olise 2010; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006). The inherent characteristics of decentralisation and democratisation of information technology which support multi-directional information flow can be easily maximised. With the new media, it is possible to promote direct and informed participation of right’s holders in advocacy on issues that concern them. The new media also facilitates collaborative and dynamic communication models that are embodied in the technologies. But it has been argued that people are the epicentre of development, not technology. In addition, the expectation of digital utopians that the internet would drive social and political change needs to be

balanced with reality. Rosen’s observation is appropriate here: “twitter and facebook are indeed useful tools, but they are not tools of revolution” (Rosen 2011: 1).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to effectively deploy the new media in promoting children’s rights agenda in the country, the following recommendations are critical.

1. It is necessary to mobilise the synergy between ‘the old’ and ‘the new’ media in child rights advocacy and child development mobilisation. Both media possess unique characteristics that need to be maximised for child rights promotion. While the new media is more interactive and can promote multi-dimensional flow of information, mainstream mass media are critical to influencing the public and political agenda. This is why the development and implementation of a strategy that integrates the new media into other elements of child rights promotion is crucial. The new media alone cannot address the ingrained dimensions of rights violations in the country. Therefore, both mainstream and new media are critical in achieving the child rights agenda in Nigeria.
2. Practitioners in human rights, social development and health need to maximise the multiplicity of social media platforms in their programming work. The new media is mosaic, its landscape massive and its uses variable. Nearly everything in modern society has gone digital, viral and social. The private sector has learnt this lesson and is investing substantial funds and research into how to get the best from the new media. With effective design and implementation, it is possible to turn the inherent need for connectivity and self expression which characterise the social media into a collective movement for social development and empowerment.
3. Child rights principles, especially within the context of the African Charter specifically gives a correlative duty to everyone. This necessitates the need for young people who are the principal agents and users of the new media to exercise some responsibility in its use, so as not to negate their

fundamental rights and duties. Other actors also have a critical role in promoting the correct use of the new media by young people (Kamchedzera 1999).

4. More research is needed around better understanding of the functions and dysfunctions of the new media in promoting the child rights agenda. Since the new media is constantly evolving, more investigation and analysis on its use for media mobilisation including agenda setting, issue framing, grass roots mobilisation and various forms of high level advocacy, especially policy, private sector, donor and social advocacy is imperative. This needs to be combined with more effective documentation of its impact in order to sharpen its use in overall communication for development practice. To improve the knowledge base on what works, there is a need for more documentation around the design and implementation of programmes on the new media and child rights agenda.

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