

**Political Economy, Communications Discourse and Media Policy: the Case
of Online News Commenting in Nigeria**

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of Online News Commenting in Nigeria**

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Abstract

This article provides a contribution to knowledge on the growth of online news commenting in Nigeria. Specifically, it accounts for factors which influence the character of the often fractious online discursive behaviour in evidence and what communication policy understandings might be developed from this. The article innovates by deploying a combined political economy-communication policy approach with two purposes in mind. First, drawing inspiration from the criticality of political economy, it shows how the 'representational' role of online news media set the context for the nature of the discourse in evidence premised on the long-established assertion that media content is not value-free but shaped by ideological positions. Second, underpinned by a recently re-surfaced argument espousing the value of a combined utilisation of the critical and administrative approaches to communication research, the article puts forward a set of policy-related findings for media change in a Nigerian polity often characterised by significant societal disquiet.

Keywords: Nigeria, news commenting, political economy, media policy, media representation; ideological narratives; media ownership

Introduction

The past 25 years have witnessed a paradigm shift in news provision, one of whose standout features is intensified interactivity between news providers and consumers. Having originated in the Northern hemisphere, this is also evident on the African continent, though academic analysis of it is under-developed. Academic work on news commenting has focused predominantly on exploring the discursive dynamics which have developed within news commenting environments (Papacharissi, 2004), related to both their affordances but also their problematic character. Considerably less work has been undertaken in pursuit of understanding the factors which may influence the character of such online discursive behaviour.

The article addresses this dual gap in knowledge through its focus on Nigeria, where many legacy news media organisations have online versions of their newspapers providing regularly updated information to readers, including video and audio content. Nigeria is a particularly interesting case since: it is a country with a very young population where engagement with new communication technologies for media consumption has been significant; it is characterised by strident ethnic and religious division which is often represented in news content and discussion fora; and there is evidence of strong political-economic relationships between political classes and established media interests. The article employs a framework for analysis comprising perspectives on the political economy of media allied to insights from the critical and administrative approaches to communication policy analysis to ask: what factors account for the nature of Nigerian news commenting and what policy actions can be taken to address the challenges arising from this behaviour?

The article commences by setting out the core features of the political economy of online news commenting and its relationship to communication policy. It next analyses work on the political economic features of the Nigerian news media landscape, from which themes to assist the empirical exploration of the Nigerian online news commenting environment are derived. It thereafter applies the two core themes of *News Organisation Priorities*; and *Religion, Ethnicity and Geography* to the empirical evidence presented. In its penultimate section, the article deploys the second part of its analytical framework to consider communication policy lessons from the Nigerian case.

The empirical research for the article combines semi-structured interview evidence with content analysis of online news comments. Content on the Daily Trust, (www.dailytrust.com), Vanguard (www.vanguardngr.com), Premium Times (www.premiumtimesngr.com), and Punch (www.punchngr.com) Nigerian news websites is explored.

The web scraping tool, Octoparse, was employed to unearth articles and associated comments around three high profile and controversial news ‘terms’. First, the term "farmers/herders clash" refers to long-standing and ongoing tension and violence between farmers and nomadic herders. This conflict is underpinned by issues of land rights for cattle grazing by the herders, which often leads to the destruction of crops cultivated by farmers, as well as ethnic-religious tension. Several lives and properties have been lost due to this ongoing dispute. The International Crisis Group report (2018) notes civilian casualties from the crisis six times higher than civilian deaths from the Boko Haram insurgency. The second news term relates to Nigerian President Mohamadu Buhari, who left the country to undergo medical treatment several times, trips whose durations and costs provoked measures of criticism and became a subject of national discourse in the news media. Third, in 2020, alleged use of excessive force on civilians by the Special Anti Robbery Squad (SARS) - a unit of the Nigerian Police - led to protests across the country under the moniker #EndSARS.

Data scraped from the selected online newspapers returned 26 news reports and 468 comments for analysis covering the period of February 2016 to December 2020. The chosen news events were prominent subjects of national discourse, and the four newspapers were selected based on ownership, location and ethno-religious affiliation. Although national in reach, they operate according to either what is known as the Lagos/Ibadan or Kaduna/ Abuja axes reflecting with cultural and religious underpinnings around a geographical divide (see below).

Table 1: Selected newspapers and their demographic descriptions

Newspaper	Place of Publication	Geographical Location	Location predominant religion and Ethnic Group	Axis of the Nigerian Press
Daily Trust	Abuja/Kaduna	North	Islam, Hausa/Fulani	Abuja/ Kaduna Axis
Vanguard	Lagos	South	Yoruba, Christianity	Lagos/Ibadan Axis

Premium Times	Abuja	North	Islam, Hausa/ Fulani	Abuja/ Kaduna Axis
Punch	Lagos	South	Christianity, Hausa/ Fulani	Lagos/Ibadan Axis

A series of 16 semi-structured interviews were undertaken as part of the research. The aim was to gather information on the professional experiences and motivations of a sample of Nigerian news professionals. This evidence proved important in establishing the factors underpinning the creation of Nigerian news content to which news commenters provide their often controversial reactions. Interviewees comprised working journalists and news editors who were selected to ensure the representativeness of critical factors that influence public discourse in Nigeria, such as religion and ethnicity. Interviews also occurred with a sample of news commenters. They were purposively selected on the basis of their knowledge of the subject matter of the study and their participation in online news commenting platforms. Eight journalists with different roles and eight online news commenters were interviewed.

Table 2 : Interviewees' list

Codes	Position/Role	Location	Tribe	Religion
NBJ1	North based Journalist	North	Hausa	Islam
NBJ2	North based Journalist	North	Hausa	Islam
NE 1	News Editor	South	Yoruba	Christianity
NE 2	News Editor	North	Hausa	Islam
OE1	Online Editor	North	Idoma	Christianity
OE2	Online Editor	South	Yoruba	Christianity
SJ1	Southern based Journalist	South	Yoruba	Islam
SJ2	Southern based Journalist	South	Ibo	Christianity
NC1	News Commenter	South	Yoruba	Christianity
NC2	News Commenter	South	Ikwere	Christianity
NC3	News Commenter	North	Hausa	Islam

NC4	News Commenter	North	Hausa	Islam
NC5	News Commenter	North	Kanuri	Islam
NC6	News Commenter	South	Yoruba	Islam
NC 7	News Commenter	North	Ibo	Christianity
NC8	News Commenter	South	Urhobo	Christianity

The political economy of online news commenting and communication policy

Political Economy and Online News Commenting

Most research on online news commenting explores the phenomenon from a Habermasian public sphere perspective (Habermas, 1992), focusing on the extent to which opinion formation is a product of rational and critical discussion and is able to establish the conditions for democratic deliberation (Bohman, 2004; Graham and Wright, 2014; Kies, 2013). Initial research came to the conclusion that online news platforms can provide opportunity for political discourse away from the restrictive, patron-client and elite-driven legacy media (Bosch, 2010; Grönlund and Wakabi, 2015; Mabweazara, 2014; Oyedemi, 2015; Skjerdal et al., 2015; Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke, 2014).

A less well-developed strand of research considers the political and economic factors underpinning the type of information posted on news platforms and how these can account for the production and perception of meaning. Mansell (2004) argues that a political economy framework is relevant to online news since most research focuses on *affordances* provided by online platforms under-emphasising an exploration of the dynamics of power that drive them. A political-economic approach deploys the ‘...study of social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources’ (Mosco, 2005) and is a useful lens to examine online Nigerian news commenting. Golding and Murdock (1978) argue that a media political economy approach assists in understanding social processes that condition the production of texts, their interpretation and the circumstances that shape their production. Classically, newspaper media have been viewed as part of the soft institutional infrastructure, helping to reproduce the ideological narratives of the elite (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Focusing on Africa, Adebani (2016:

213) connects ethnicity to political economy through the allocation of 'economic resources' and situates newspapers as facilitating 'discursive territoriality' displaying 'utilisation of the structural context in which these relations are located as resources in the mobilisation of identity and the struggle to gain primacy in the territorial struggle, particularly with an eye on the political, economic, social and cultural implications of such victory.'

Collins (2018) views online news commenting as a migration from 'lecture' to 'conversation', in journalism. Empirical evidence has, however, pointed up the problematic character of online information exchange displaying harassment (trolling), cyberbullying, and so-called echo chambers (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Sustain, 2017), amounting to 'dark participation' (Quandt, 2018). Research has emphasised revenue maximisation motives underpinning the development of online news provision (Fuchs, 2017; Mosco, 2017). Robles and Córdoba-Hernández (2018) explore commodification where governance of news websites illustrates the pre-eminence of profitability: online news sites to attract traffic and increase advertisement revenue post controversial stories (Fuchs, 2017).

Communication Policy and Political Economy

McChesney (2013) sees two core concerns in the political economy of communication: the influence that structural and institutional issues exert on media content and its societal role; and the nature of government policy affecting the media system. This links well the relationship between the products of political-economic analysis and the long established critical tradition of communication policy. The application of ideas in critical political economy to online news media commenting spaces in Nigeria provides wherewithal to explore the material conditions influencing the posting of news to online platforms reactions from participants.

One of the quintessential debates in communication research concerns the potentially conflictual relationship between critical and administrative research traditions (Lazarsfeld, 1941). A classic administrative approach would undertake research in service of – and to improve – the workings of an existing system, whereas a critical approach might call into question – and argue for a re-shaping of – the fundamental conditions of such as system. The debate on the relationship between both traditions in the specific context of communication policy research has been recently re-examined to valuable effect by Napoli and Friedland (2016), who argue that 'the academic climate has evolved in a direction in which the hostility

between the critical and administrative research traditions has diminished...creating an environment more conducive to more integrative approaches'. It is argued that 'the strict methodological divide that is presumed to separate critical and administrative communication research appears not quite so strict within the context of intellectual foundations of communications policy scholarship' (ibid: 49).

The ensuing questioning of historically held 'givens' around the critical and administrative traditions led, for example, to a reconsideration of the view of administrative research as 'objective' and, by contrast, critical research as more 'normative' in orientation. It led to a consideration of the potential value of qualitative research findings, traditionally more associated with the critical tradition, for media policy makers. Conversely, it also questioned the assumption that the practical findings of administrative underpinned research could not challenge, fundamentally, the status quo. In this article, we link the criticality of political-economic analysis to this recently revised understanding of the relationship between the critical and administrative traditions in communication policy where 'a substantial component of communications policy research is fundamentally concerned with informing and influencing policy outcomes' (Napoli and Friedland, 2016: 41) in order to provide insights into online news commenting in Nigeria.

The political economy of the Nigerian media system

Udoakah (2017) argues that the political economy of the Nigerian media system reflects a broader contestation for power, elite domination, and ethnic and religious tension in the country. Tador (1996) has classified three phases in the development of the Nigerian media system: the early press; the nationalist press; and the contemporary press. The early media consisted of religious newspapers, most prominently the *Iwe Iroyin fun awon ara Egba ati Yoruba* (1846-63) the first newspaper published in Nigeria. Overall, apart from being used for Christian proselytisation activities, early newspapers set the tone for political discussion and nationalism. Other scholarly work has focused on the emergence of the mass media in Nigeria from the perspective of a nationalist struggle for self-determination and independence (Oso, 2012). Okoro (2012: 7) asserts that "The post-independence government and politics produced a more vibrant press which moved from the turf of pugnacious journalism to assume a fourth estate position to accomplish the watchdog goal".

Dare (2010) argues that the editorial content of the media from circa 1960 onwards reflected ethnic, religious and party affiliation patterns. Ethnicity has polarised the media system into

the Lagos/Ibadan and Kaduna/Abuja press axes. Some of the leading newspapers in the Ibadan/Lagos axis are the Guardian, Punch, Vanguard, and Tribune, while those in the Kaduna/ Abuja axis are The New Nigerian and the Daily Trust. Although news media organisations within this dichotomy claim to be nationally - not ethnically nor religiously - driven, empirical work has suggested otherwise (Abati, 2000; Omenugha, 2004). Amenaghawon (2015), in the analysis of the notorious Christmas Day bombing in Abuja in 2011, argues that ethnic and religious issues influence the way newspapers report the same event. Geography is also important since the northern Nigeria has a Muslim majority, and the south a majority of Christians (United Nations, 2019). News outlets from the Kaduna/ Abuja axis are more likely to present a news report from a 'northern centric', and Islamic perspective, whilst those from the Lagos/Ibadan axis are more likely to reflect a 'southern centric' and Christian position.

Before the internet, mainstream media played an active role in the country's political discourse. They often set agendas and acted as a platform for galvanising opinions and deliberation. The Nigerian independence movement and the political infrastructure that emerged after its realisation linked significantly to the print press (Kperogi, 2016; Olayiwola, 2014; Seng and Hunt, 1986). The intermittent nature of civilian rule in Nigeria before 1999 played a role in its media system. Decrees were often created after a political coup to restrict the press or even to effect outright proscription (Okoro, 2012) yet it was at the forefront of the campaign for the return to democracy (Kperogi, 2013).

Amuwo (2010) argues that Nigerian political economy reflects a disjuncture between the interests of the political class and citizens with strong ethnic and religious dimensions. Oso (2012) argues that mass media have become an extension of the ruling class undermining the ability of the press to nourish a public sphere for social and political debate. Ojebuyi and Salawu (2019) highlight connections between the political alignment of newspapers, the framing of their news content and the political affiliation of the owners. Udoakah (2017) shows that government ownership at both the state and federal level accounts for the largest concentration of media in Nigeria. All the state governments and the federal administration have their own television and radio stations though private ownership dominates print media. Patronage of mass media by the government is critical to the former's existence.

Existing research has thus established that core features of the Nigerian media system - news organisation commercial priorities; ethnicity and religion; and geography and political alignment - play a determining role in the nature of news content production. The remainder of this article presents analysis of the extent to which these features also influence the nature of online news commenting in this news production context.

Explaining online news commenting in Nigeria through the lens of political economy

In Nigeria, online news commenting has become a recognisably important phenomenon, particularly among citizens with more affordable access to smartphones and domestic Internet connections (Adelakun, 2018; Alimi and Matiki, 2017; Omotosho, 2020). Evidence suggests a problematic development of such activity, with Jibril and Targema (2017) going as far as to describe the Nigerian online news commenting space as chaotic. The emergence of uncivil behaviour in news commenting spaces has led to a consideration of the extent to which, and how, regulation of such comments might be required and take effect. The role of moderation has garnered academic attention with evidence connection between moderatorial intervention and a reduction in agonistic and uncivil news commenting (Wang, 2021; Yeo et al., 2019). The rationale behind - and extent of - moderation is under-explored where the relationship between geographic and ethno-religious divides and news comment deletion is significant.

In Nigeria, most news sites now have a restricted form of access to their comment space which includes machine moderation, utilising artificial intelligence Natural Language Processing programmes that automatically detect and remove abusive and uncivil comments. Commenting spaces now also require registration before a newsreader can participate. All four online news media sampled in this study have Disqus – discursive moderation software - on their platforms. Readers register on the news websites providing identification, including a photo and email address. Direct human moderation involves monitoring of news comment spaces by editors and removing what are considered to be uncivil comments. News organisations have also created extensions from their sites to social media platforms which has led to commenting on news stories.

News organisation priorities

A key issue is readership understanding of the influence of institutional structures and priorities in news provision including perceptions of the roles of editorial boards and managers of news organisations who decide editorial policy of the media organisation. Important are perceived preferences of owners motivated by the dual goals of revenue maximisation and securing legitimacy in the eyes of the government (Udoakah, 2017). In Nigeria, the state invests heavily in advertising (OMD, 2019) and Dhakal (2011) argues that media owners often ensure that their organisations run in line with the state's political-economic interests.

A notable feature of online news in Nigeria is the relationship between the news values in hard copy content and regularly updated online content. Here, NE1 commented:

There is no significant difference in the news we post online and those that appeared in our physical publications. Whatever news values and editing process we apply for the print (sic) is equally applied to the online version.

It also emerged that news content and the management of comments on it are underpinned by the desire to make online news websites attractive, profitable and popular (research interviews, 2018). Evidence exists of a view that sensationalism in content will attract readers, increasing traffic to news sites and generating more advertisement revenue. NE2 noted that:

we report news taking into cognisance, currency, impact, and what other competitors are reporting. We do this to put our website in good stead for advertisement and revenue and take off comments injurious to our image.

Another editor, OE1, argued that:

journalism is a business, and we are in it with other competitors. We here see our website as leverage to break the news before others and regularly update with fresh angles. Doing this makes our brand attractive to advertisers and even government agencies for patronage.

A key challenge in the environment of online news commenting is control of the moderation process. OE2 explained that

...privilege has been given to certain people to put their content (sic). They bypass or exploit your platform when you open your comment channel, and you will see people putting all sort (sic) of things there.

Further evidence suggests that use of moderation is commercially and politically motivated to address unwanted adverts posted by commenters in the middle of comments. An interviewee argued that 'some commenters are planted to do a hatchet job. This is so because our newspaper is believed to be owned by a politician, so we are often targeted by political opponents'.

A recurring issue in moderation activity is ensuring that comments are in line with the news organisation's strategic corporate objectives, specifically related to commercial success. SJ2 noted that:

Our news organisation is a big brand within the media landscape in Nigeria. We cannot afford to allow any form of comment that will tarnish our image and affect our acceptability and patronage.

NBJ1 emphasised the importance of the profit motive in the selection of news where:

the commenting section of an online newspaper is supposed to allow the readers to express their views on issues. However, as part of our human moderation, we ensure that comments are not against what we stand for as a media organisation and the drive to protect our integrity as an organisation

Yet, OE2, another news editor interviewed, summarised the often conflicting challenges faced by news content providers, arguing that the audience is under-served and that online news media determine the 'news to think about'. SJ2, a journalist with of the news media organisations interviewed, argued that:

Although, we try as much as possible in our publication to ensure high ethical standards...we cannot shy away from the fact that our organisation is not a charity institution. We incur bills and pay staff. For us to remain afloat, we need to make our online platform attractive to readers and also to advertisers. To do this implies breaking news, posting exciting stories and angles. For example, we have a section for opinion polls on our website, and this has proved to be so popular and has increased our online traffic (research interview, 2018).

Yet these assertions of the predominance of commerciality were tempered by the views of another online news editor interviewee, OE1 who argued that,

we do not allow the urge for money to override our sense of reasoning. So, for us, do it right first by following the ethic (sic), and there will be an increase in traffic, advertisers' patronage that will push up the revenue because we have many people that are not doing it right these days. That is our joker of getting our traffic (sic)).

An understanding of the theme of organisational priorities employed by online news providers is evident to some degree in the reactions of news commenters. NC3, a contributor to an online news website, argued that content providers

give to us in the form of news what will sell their papers by attracting advertisement and make their titles more popular. To me, what we see is what we react to in our debate online based on how the media portray the news

Another news commenter, NC5 argued that:

the need to attract patronage by government and advertisers is a problem facing the online newspaper and the space they provide for us to say our views. I am critical of some of the government policies, and most often, my comments do not get published

Yet another interviewee, NC1 commenter argued that:

Tell me, is the news we frequently read not about the elites or those in government? The more we read about them, the more the news websites increase its traffic and popularity, thereby making more money

This was further emphasised by an interviewee commenter, NC8 who indicated that:

most of the issues we discuss in the commenting section and how we go about the discussion are influenced by the way the news media organisation set the agenda. Remember, the news usually revolves around the elite, and they control the media. So, we comment or argue with each other, and we often do it unconsciously from an exploited position using an economic imbalance of one geopolitical zone of the country against another or our religion and ethnic identities to insult one another. We do this while the elites are busy enriching their pockets

Religion, Ethnicity and Geography

As online news has become more established in Nigeria, there is evidence of strong reaction to news content through online commenting. The four newspapers selected for the study published news reports on the subject matter of the research. Although the selected newspapers are national in reach, the tone of the news reports from which comments were extracted reflects the geographic location and, by extension, the dominant religion and ethnic orientation within their source location (see Table 1 above). The evolution of comments analysed was influenced by this subject matter but also the tone of initial commenters in the comment thread.

News readers' postings and comments around the Fulani/Herdsmen clashes in Nigeria have generated much hostility, resulting in evidence of uncivil ethnically and religiously

underpinned sentiments in the ensuing exchanges. The following brief comment thread in a news report by the *Vanguard* newspaper (February 26 2016) on an attack by herdsmen on a village in Benue state is illustrative:

(Vanguard Newspaper)

This is the time to rise up and defend yourself oh dreamer, Satan in the image of beastly government have been let loose into the world to kill steal and destroy, who has believed our report? We echo it at the rooftop and market square that this Buhari we know is a sectional, religious bigot, bias and sentimental human being and nobody cares to understand instead we were called all manners of names by even a lot of Christian; Jihad is going on whether we like it or not many Islamic a gender are being introduced like Sukuk using Christian to actualise it. If we did not rise now sir, we are doom

(Premium Times)

Northern Islamic secret agenda is entirely in place in Nigeria, and all their aims are working accordingly. All hail Buhari/Buraitai, (Nigeria military chief), the Nigerian Police and all the law enforcement agencies in Nigeria which have been hijacked and dominated by the Northern power for secretly empowering the Fulani herdsmen in carrying out all the agreed assignments without fear nor delay.

Another example is a thread of comments between two commenters on the Daily Trust newspaper commenting platform:

#Help #Help #stop the killing of Biafrans Christians by Nigeria Soldiers led by Islamic extremists President Muhammad Buhari

where were the Igbos when Buhari become the President of Nigeria? ****foolish people**** is, not the same Igbos neglect themselves of being in power, due to their selfish interest. You said, "Nigeria is a zoo", and you are still living inside, *****who are you? *****are you not an animal? You better be careful of your words.

In a different context, there is strong evidence of fractious reaction to a news report of the health of the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari, after his travel abroad for medical treatment, with the headline "I won't return until the doctors are satisfied" published in the Premium Times Newspaper of February 11 2017. It provides further evidence of the fractious political and ethnically motivated exchanges in online news commenting spaces.

(Premium Times Newspaper)

If Ijaw man Jonathan had left the shores of Nigeria-with the type of ailment troubling Bingu Fulani Buhari, who clearly hails from the Niger Republic --But now thinks he is the President of the Fulani emirate in Aso Rock and not Nigeria certain 9jas from the old regions of the country which Lord Lugard created in 1914 would have asked that Good Old Jonathan be impeached or like Bakare once declared given the late Gaddafi treatment

meaning beaten to death by Fulani officers from Mali-----and his remains thrown to the sharks swimming around the Ocean floors of our crude oil polluted sea waters in the South-south. The truth of the matter is that we have had enough of the RULE by the cursed spirit of Fulanis, most of whom are not even Nigerians. So why should Nigerians continue to fall for the biggest 419ners on earth--the Fulanis

(Premium Times Newspaper)

President Muhammadu Buhari is a very straight forward, honest, transparent and patriotic leader who would not keep anything in hiding for the Nigeria-public. As a human being, Mr President Muhamadu Buhari can fall sick or incapacitated; hence, President Muhammadu Buhari deserves to listen to his doctors, and follow through whatever the direction his doctors may direct him. If he is alive, hail and in good health, then he could continue to lead Nigeria, toward fiscal prudence, economic progress and infrastructure development. Some naive and ignoramus in this forum will continue to display their common-sense-defect and stone-hearted-comments in this forum because they are not human beings.

A third, more recent example of the problematic character of news commenting relates to reactions to stories regarding the #EndSARS movement related to alleged excessive use of force by the SARS police unit. The *Daily Trust* newspaper, a northern paper, regarded as supporting northern and Islamic perspectives published a news story with the headline: "#EndSARS protest plan to destroy Buhari administration – Sheik Jingir" on October 18 2020. By contrast, the *Punch* newspaper, part of the Lagos/Ibadan axis, produced a story (October 23 2020), 'Northern Govs condemn attack on #EndSARS protester, demand probe'. The stories elicited the following comments illustrating the fractious and uncivil character of news commenting:

Daily Trust comments

(Daily Trust Newspaper)

Truly is a set up by the Nigerian enemies to the administration of President Muhammadu Buhari so that they will be able to do whatever they want.

(Daily Trust Newspaper)

It seems like the Northerners are not ready to be cured of their mental retardation; you better get ready to have your own country.

(Daily Trust Newspaper)

The reason is due to sectionalism and religious intolerance inflicted on us initially by our leaders in other to segregate us and achieve their political interest. Simple That is why both the regions are against the other in whatever being it positive or negative.

Punch newspaper comments

(Punch Newspapers)

All these mischievous pleas are totally useless from any northerners. You people are so desperate for power and will do anything to remain in power. All these sweet talks now are because you people actually realise where this is heading, and you people want to fool us with your plea.

(Punch Newspaper)

Who send them abegi leave your crocodile sympathy but know this the journey to the end of Nigeria has started yes very soon we will go our ways.

(Punch Newspaper)

Northern parasites that enjoyed the killings

Alongside this evidence of ethnically, religious and geographically based responses to news stories, there is also evidence among news commenters of clear awareness of the problematic nature of the news commenting environment. For example, NC7, one of the interviewees asserted that:

our leaders have blindfolded our eyes with religious and ethnic issues to keep us busy while they siphon our resources....use these issues to justify their political decisions and allocation of resources to ensure equity and guide against marginalisation in their words while they are busy looting...the elites are using us against each other' (research interview, 2018).

Two interviewees argued that the commenting space in Nigeria is a place for expressing disparaging comments influenced by ethnic and religious sentiments. NC6 noted that:

I see the commenting space as an area to slog it out with those who feel they are privileged to insult my tribe. Nigeria is not a fair place. It is a country where a particular tribe feel superior and marginalise (sic) others. So when I am online, I attack anybody or comments that support the ethnic group and anybody from that area' (research interview, 2018).

Another interviewee, NC4 argued that emotion rather than a critical analysis of topics dominates discussion in the online space something that is historically founded since:

The pattern of discussion on the online platforms has not moved from those primordial sentiments that have divided our nation. In fact, they are stronger online now, and people are increasingly becoming hostile to each other, especially where they don't share the same culture or religion

This perception of news commenting can provoke exasperation, with one interviewee claiming that '...ethnicity, religion and the likes, they go a long way in affecting people's comments most of the time online'.

The evidence of this article thus sits in contrast to assertions of the democratic and participatory affordances of the online world (Ahearn, 2009; Benkler, 2006; Pavlik, 2016). The political economy analysis of readers' participation in online news commenting points up how such behaviour is technologically enabled, rather than technologically determined (see Mosco 2017). It confirms Orji's (2010) characterisation of the conflictual 'ethnicisation' Nigerian news commenting environments. It also provides further evidence of the argument of Vujnovic et al. (2010) that extolling the participatory affordances of the online media and their discourse sections are illusory because of the economic and revenue-generating imperatives that impinge on the system.

Political economy, communication policy and online news commenting in Nigeria

The employment of a political-economic lens to understand Nigerian online news commenting, with its relationship to the critical communication research approach to communication policy, provides the basis to establish policy-based findings pointing to the need for change in a polity that has shown itself to be at the time of writing a febrile environment of societal disquiet. The evidence of the article suggests that the ideological and news selection imperatives embedded in Nigerian 'hard copy' news are regularly transposed to news commenting sections online. This undermines aspirations that a new technological environment for dissemination and consumption of news will - by dint of some automatic process - create an enlightened engagement with news content and a similar kind of interaction between consumers.

The work of Mosco (2005) has pointed to commercial imperatives at work in online news environments and the evidence of this article shows that profit-maximising goals pursued through the quest for advertising revenue also underpin the content provided for comment in Nigerian news environments. The evidence of the article also suggests strongly that religion and ethnicity - core elements of the Nigerian political economy - influence the subject matter that is presented online which, in turn, translates often into uncivil exchanges in the online commenting space. These findings confirm those of previous scholars such as Suberu (1998) and Udoakah (1990). The evidence for policy scholars thus appears clear: political-economic factors nullify and can undermine and over-ride the often cheerfully articulated discursive potential of online news commenting environments. Commercial considerations,

specifically the need to increase traffic to news websites and protection of the corporate image of the news organisation, influence the way media organisations manage their online news platforms. This can amount to a problematic mix liable to undermine the principles of journalism in the public interest (see McChesney, 2013). The evidence of the article thus underlines the enduring importance of media representation in journalism content (see Herman and Chomsky, 1988) and, in so doing, suggests strongly that policy measures related to content and its representation are more likely to address the *cause* of evident problems, rather than their symptoms and thus secure some degree of efficacy. Further, a political economy approach brings us to the - perhaps difficult - conclusion that only modest aspects of these structural conditions can be altered through policy change in the foreseeable future.

Nevertheless, drawing on the pragmatic approach of the administrative tradition of communication policy research can lead to conclusions which may serve to ameliorate matters and move towards a more progressive online commenting space in one of Africa's youngest and fastest-growing democracies. The findings of this article suggest the need for communication policy change in three core areas. First, all online news providers need to install a feature on their commenting section that allows commenters to flag any comment deemed uncivil, inappropriate or off the topic of deliberation. There is some evidence of the growth of this 'flagging' feature on websites (notably of Vanguard and The Daily Trust), all online news media need to embrace it. This could be achieved through self-regulatory change initially followed by, if necessary, direct regulatory intervention. It is a minimal cost action that stems from the need to adhere to civil interaction in the commenting process. Second, the article argues that the Nigerian government should convene a committee comprising online news providers to agree measures on how to (self-) regulate online news platforms to minimise the expression of potentially inflammatory comments. The findings of this article suggest the value of what would be equivalent to a communications 'epistemic community' (Haas, 2016) operating from the content supply side. The Nigerian Union of Journalists could develop its code of ethics to stipulate best practice measures for the monitoring of online news commenting activities in order to achieve civil exchange. The Nigerian government could expand the purview of the Nigerian Press Council to serve as an ombudsman where problematic postings evident on online news platforms are reported and addressed. Moreover, government and online news organisations in Nigeria should develop a more proactive stance on awareness-raising initiatives - such as public information advertisements - to point up the importance of online democratic engagement. The advertisements could explain in simple

terms how uncivil behaviour and posting of offensive content during an online discussion can exacerbate existing divisions and act as impediments to progressive social change. These public information announcements could be accompanied by longer-term media literacy and awareness-raising initiatives at school level. Part of the computer literacy curriculum could explicitly cover the positive value to be generated from reasonable, considered and tolerant communicative exchanges across electronic communicative environments, as well as technical training.

Conclusion

Although Nigeria is a signatory to some of the international conventions aiming to uphold digital rights, such as the *African Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms*, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and the *International Convention on Civil and Political Rights*, there is no comprehensive regulatory policy or legal framework for the online news environment at the time of writing. Yet the evidence and findings of this article suggest a clear need for the establishment of such a policy framework. Instead, most of the attempts to moderate reader comments in online news environments come in the form of human or machine moderation. As most news platforms in Nigeria reflect the news values of legacy media, the editorial policies and other news processing mechanisms of the latter are applied to the online environment despite clear differences in their features. The political economy-communication policy lens employed in this article allows focus to be trained on the consequent problematic nature of online news commenting in Nigeria but also points up the, albeit limited, scope for progressive change.

Shapiro and Rogers (2017) argue that there is a dilemma arising from acknowledging the freedom of expression enabled by the online news platforms and the need to balance the ensuing communicative freedom with responsibility to ensure societal harmony. A political economy analysis allows a stark setting out of the parameters of the problem, thereby laying the ground for policy change. This requires a combinative approach where regulatory intervention, increased commercial public interest responsibility and growing citizen awareness raising leading to behavioural change are most likely to secure progress in interactive online Nigerian communication. This has the potential to deliver more rational discourse capable of promoting a shared understanding of national priorities in the online news deliberative space and should be pursued as a priority.

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