Internet Access in Nigeria: Mobile Phones, Issues, and Millennials

by

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Abstract

This paper interrogates mobile phones in the context of online patronage and ease of Internet access in Nigeria and adopts an exploratory and sociological research design wherein data was collected qualitatively through interviews and focus group discussion and analysed descriptively using the interpretive method based on findings that show that mobile phones are popularly portrayed as potent allies in the quest for democracy and development. Thus, the paper concludes that with the advancement in the technology, one would wonder why Internet access cannot be free or as cheap as it is in other parts of the developing world.

Introduction

Towards the globalization process, mobile phones and Internet access have become veritable tools almost nobody can do without. In many countries where mobile phones are available, the device has almost become a second personality. Mobile phones have become part of our everyday lives that go everywhere, hence, it has become part of us to the extent that when we have an important appointment, and we forget your cell phone, it becomes imperative to return to pick it up, and be late for the appointment, and in other cases, one may become paranoid, imagining a ringing phone or the sound of his/ her mobile app beeping as a way of notification for announcing new messages.

Hence, this paper seeks to address the way young people have converted Internet usage for an alleviation of their poverty by: exhibiting creativity, taking risks with Ponzi schemes, engaging entrepreneurship, the upgrading of phones as a sense of "big-boynism and big-girlism" as per techno-centrist discourse associated with the Internet which diverts attention from the actual situation that is largely characterized by poor equipment, poverty, social inequality and economic dependency. In other words, I argue here that mobile phones and Internet access can only heighten social, ideological or cultural dimensions of daily life, and thus, "they are not decisive in shaping or governing our relationships or our behaviours.

However, mobile phones are not 'just tools', because they are associated with meanings; they are also 'enchanted and enchanting devices' to which all kinds of expectations are attached."(Obadare, 2010).

Obadare elaborates more, stating that:

"There is something essentially liberating about owning a mobile phone. For the owner, the mobile phone performs a myriad of 'miracles', central among which are the ability to be multi-locational or trans-locational. As the networks connecting people in the global village become denser, so also does the need for communication increase"(Obadare, 2010: 99).

Digital Marginalization

In the case where there is a mobile phone, but Internet access is denied, one is included in what Laguerre (2010) called the "digital marginalization", a process that can be caused by many factors, including poor network, lack of access to digital devices, or e-literacy. And in reference to when Internet access is denied, it not only deflates the productivity and creativity of African millennials (those born in the early 1980s and the mid-1990s to early 2000s), but also points to a functionalist view of Internet inequality constituted through the "divides" of accessibility, censored participation, and acceptability in the Internet economy, and thus, "Understanding the staggering nature of this problem would require telling the stories of young Internet entrepreneurs and innovators in Africa, who continue to be marginalized while investing and contributing to the Internet economy" (Counted and Arawole, 2016).

Returning to Laguerre, he asks "... if Internet access is the answer, then what is the question?", and position that aligns with Alzouma (2011:2) in "that the possibilities attached to these technologies (mobile phones, laptops and Internet) are largely exaggerated and that the introduction of the Internet cannot in itself amount to structural, social and economic transformation". Hence, his classification of the digital marginalization process is as useful part of the digital divide concept, and thus involves issues concerning: exclusion embedded design, appropriation, access, usage, policy and reproduction with a special look at design because it is about the profit-driven design made for the common user wherein sales are made for a specific use, then publicity for sales will favour a particular group more than the others, and thus, the tool/service is made available and less expensive in one market/sites compared to other markets/sites.

The question of digital marginalization is complex and an ongoing concern at every turn, especially when the major language of the Internet is the English language, and then the question is what happens to those that do not read or write in English, are they marginalized forever?

This work doesn't engage this topic, however it is a controversial matter and in any case the relative representation of languages in the network is a fast changing data, although it is considered that amongst the more than 6000 existing languages less than 500 have a digital existence. And specifically, data about languages can be specified either as related only to mother tongue (also referred to as first language and noted L1) or as related to first language plus second language spoken (L1+L2) with data on second languages far from being consensual and the differences are one of the main cause of discrepancy between data on languages used on the Internet. Yet, in terms of users, there is a consensus to state that the top three languages are respectively English, Chinese and Spanish; beyond the consensus is lost; and in terms of contents, there is no consensus on the order of languages beyond the fact that English is still the first language in terms of contents, although the value of the corresponding percentage varies greatly depending on the source ('Languages Used on the Internet' *Wikipedia,* retrieved October 11, 2017).

Netizens: Mobile Phone Users

The Internet has become a community on its own, and its members are called "netizens" (Hauben 1997), a portmanteau of the words Internet and citizen to describe a person involved in online communities or the Internet in general, and also, a person with an interest and active engagement in improving the Internet, making it an intellectual and a social resourcethat may include its surrounding political structures, especially in regard to open access, net neutrality and free speech. Hence, people have created names and identities for themselves in different manners, and so many battles have been fought on the Internet using the hash tag. A relevant example is the #BRING BACK OUR GIRLS campaign that Nigerian women initiated, when two hundred and seventeen girls were abducted and kept for many months on their way from the Government Secondary School in the town of Chibok in Borno State, Nigeria which used modern technology as a tool for democratic activism and consolidation" (Obadare 2010).

Gleaning from the works of Jordan Smith, the American anthropologist who carried out his fieldwork in Owerri, Imo state in Nigeria; he traced the trajectory of mobile phones in reference to economic values and effects; and the African niche of demonizing phones wherein a hoax of some magic numbers being assumed to cause death, and "Once the popular rumours circulated widely, Nigerian newspapers carried stories printing some of the suspected numbers and incorporating quotations from citizens who allegedly witnessed the effects of these sinister calls (Akinsuyi 2004). But the newspapers also published statements from spokespersons for the country's major mobile telephone service providers, denying that such killer numbers existed (Ikhemuemhe 2004)". And in short, this was a focus on the mentality and the cultural background of people towards embracing a new technology, and often, when a new lifestyle, dressing or device is introduced from outside African culture, it is sometimes first suspected to be fetish or evil, a belief only side lined after much persuasion and proofs are sustained to sway popular sentiments that could border on fundamentalism.

Smartphone Social Status

The basic desire of the average Nigerian youth is to own a Smartphone, so they can 'browse' the Internet, and should they have a "Chinko" phone,[12] they are considered to be very low in class, hence a poor person, or simply without a taste for good things, thus many youth do not patronize them, because of this, and because the phones are considered to be cheap with limited features, and because they want to always be up to date in the Internet world. Nevertheless, the phones popular, but the iPhone (a line of smartphones designed and marketed by Apple Inc. with a user interface built around the device's multi-touch screen, a virtual keyboard, Wi-Fi, connection to cellular networks that can also shoot video, take photos, play music, send and receive email, browse the web, send and receive text messages, follow GPS navigation, record notes, perform mathematical calculations, and receive visual voicemail, etc.) is the national status symbol. Many of the young men like the phones as a way to impress young women as they are considered big boys. With the rise of dollars from two hundred naira (the currency of Nigeria which is subdivided into 100 Kobo) to five hundred, whoever owns an iPhone, is indeed a big boy/girl.

In this regard, according to Louis Althousser's theory of *interpellation* identity, people are largely interpolated (a *process whereby people acknowledge and respond to ideologies, thereby recognizing themselves as subjects)* by what they watch and with media technology (new media technology), the three major functions of the media is to inform, educate, and entertain. And even while in error, the audience assume they are educating them as to what to do, or how to live. Hence, the money youth expend on getting these gadgets they become a status mechanism of youth via access/ownership of a particular cell phone, for example a blackberry Smartphones which began with a "pin" or "pinging" to identify special friends in the exchange of numbers. Hence, the start of Blackberry style of determining social status of which I call "big-boyism" and "big-girlism" in Nigeria as people constantly note the quality of their peers' phones, openly conveying approval or disapproval in ways that consciously connect cell phones to social status. And even where people cannot afford to upgrade their phones, the quality of one's cell phone cover and the type and number of accessories owned can be the subject of more fine grained attempts to assert both status and fashion (Smith, 2010). To avoid these social downgrade, some ladies involved in dating big men, not in stature, but in the size of the money in their pockets.

But more paramount, in order for Africa to sustain its democracies, empower its communities, ensure community driven reconstruction and development, and to compete globally, investment in technological advances and telecommunications infrastructure will be essential in closing the digital divide gap, which will allow Africa to take its rightful place among the economies of the world (Obadare, (2010). Unfortunately, Nigerians are yet to get to stages where they can collectively overcome the social status quorum and understand that the producers of these phones have decided to exploit them by recycling these products,

Knowing that as new brands of phones begin to emerge, people also migrate from one brand of phones to the other; trying these new phones, to check out like earlier aforementioned, that the basic needs of the average Nigerian on mobile phones is about Internet access and speed.

Yet, it is all a game: mobile phones are continually upgraded, and people rush to buy them (the moment it has an extra feature); the advertisers have seemed to have studied the psyche of the buyers, and now, phones now in different shapes and sizes, from sleek to bold, and even the colouration of the phones can be an attraction.

Electronic Dumping (e-dumping)

Coupled with above issues and challenges, we also have electronic dumping, i.e.., electronics which are destined for reuse, resale, salvage, recycling, or disposal which ultimately can lead to adverse human health effects and environmental pollution.

According to one of our focused group discussion with my colleagues, we were arguing why the deposit of electronics goods should be termed e-dumping, since we were the ones who travel abroad to bring in these fairly used goods. Some of these goods are faulty or totally bad, but most merchants do not test them, yet they ship them in for sales to their existing customers. Looking at it on the other hand, we discovered that, it is these people who repackage these items, make it look attractive and sell to us at cheaper rates, without considering the environmental and health danger it might cause (after the bad goods have been piled for over a while, they are sorted, stacked in the open, overtime, the device gets rusted and recycles baack into the soil which mixes with the water used for drinking and other domestic use). Alaba International market in Lagos, Nigeria is the largest depot for these bad electronic goods.

Mobile phones are imported into Nigeria almost every day, for the consumption of its citizens, thus, it is becoming a hot ground for e-dumping, electronic waste or e-waste which describes discarded electrical or electronic devices, and in Nigeria, used electronics which are destined for reuse, resale, salvage, recycling, or disposal which ultimately can lead to adverse human health effects and environmental pollution. This is indeed a large problem as electronic waste is exported from rich, developed countries into Africa (Minter 2016), and Nigeria is one of the main West African countries that imports used electrical and electronic equipment. And unfortunately, coming from the angle of unemployment and poverty, Nigerians have an attachment for fairly used products; for reasons like, affordability and durability; and interestingly, it is believed that, fairly used laptops, mobile phones and other electronics devices are more durable when they have been fairly used, rather than new products.

It is alarming that a new mobile phone formerly sold for twenty thousand naira is now almost three times the former price, close to sixty thousand naira, as a matter of digression, how can a bag of 50kg rice, formerly sold between eight to ten thousand naira suddenly escalated to twenty-three thousand naira and above! Almost all commodities were inflated, even those averagely rich who seem to be comfortable were experiencing this famine, salaries are no longer enough to buy basic commodities, and most Nigerians are rattled.

Ponzi Schemes

In unity with the issues of the Internet and specifically smartphones is their illegal usages as different Ponzi schemes in Nigeria arise daily, although the nation is undergoing a season of economic recession herein the survival instincts of Nigerians are high, creating more strees, thus more fraudulent investment ideas and operations where the operator generates returns for older investors through revenue paid by new investors, rather than from legitimate business activities. Hence, operators of the Ponzi schemes usually entice new investors by offering higher returns than other investments in form of short-term returns that are either abnormally high or unusually consistent.

Many Nigerians, young and old, immaterial of religion or belief are tempted by Ponzi schemes, especially the most popular "Mavrodi Mondial Movement" wherein an individual provides help to someone, after one month, the individual gets his/her money back with an increment of thirty per cent. Hence, if an individual provide a hundred thousand naira help to an anonymous person, he/she uploads the teller, either by scanning or snapping the teller number to upload to a site, and as soon as the other person receives an alert of payment, the person confirms the payment, then after a maximum of thirty days, the "help provider" gets a return of one hundred and thirty thousand naira. This activity looked like magic or surely a sort of scam, and Nigerians were sceptical at first, and the questions were, where and how would the thirty per cent be generated, since, one is not paying interest on the perceived "loan"?

At the early introduction of the scheme, Nigerians were sceptical and careful. They thought to themselves, this is a sort of scam, as nobody knows where the money was coming from. So many didn't involve themselves, and until the daring ones, tried and succeeded, so they tried the second, third, fourth times, then the overall confidence of the people grew, as it helped to alleviate some people's poverty. However, people began to express regret and disappointment, a lamentation developed as a result of the eventual mass discovery of a scam after the scheme was suspended for about three months. Some had invested their salaries, in expectation of a bigger thirty per cent; many people even borrowed money to invest, etc.; there was a case of a young man who invested the money budgeted for his wedding, when it was two weeks to the wedding, he could not stand the shame of not having money to sponsor his own wedding, then he poisoned himself.

So many others were hospitalised, when the scheme was suspended. The essence of this allusion is that this is part of what (Counted and Arawole) opined as a scheme enhanced by Internet participation.

These Ponzi schemes gained ground in the nation's economic state and the anonymity of cyberspace, and many classes of people including religious leaders who vehemently stood against the schemes, later fell into the trap of participating in them, especially the Mavrodi Mondial Movement, then in January 2017 the MMM system crashed.

Millennials and Technological Uniqueness

In reference to what we think or know about technological exceptionalism or uniqueness "... it's not just their gadgets — it's the way they've fused their social lives into them. For example, three-quarters of Millennials have created a profile on a social networking site, according to the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan think tank based in Washington, D.C. For instance, Linda Ikeji, Bella Naija, Nairaland, and many more are part of the most popular blogs (regularly updated websites or web pages) in Nigeria. Hence, Counted and Arawole (2016) asked some essential questions about Africa's millennial generation contribution to development in Africa as fuse their social lives into technology, saying:

> To a large extent, African teens and twenty-somethings, even those in their early thirties, who are making the passage into adulthood at the start of the third millennium, have begun to fuse their social lives into technology. Besides, if technological exceptionalism truly differentiates the millennial generation from other generations—as we assume that Africa's teens and twenty-somethings are the millennials of Africa— what effect can technology and its associated systems have on Africa's millennial generation? And to what extent can millennials contribute to development in Africa?

In answer to this, the youths have created other technological adventure, which also doubles as a means of surviving in Nigeria as young techno centrists have gathered in Yaba, Lagos, Nigeria to form a "technopolis" (an enclave for ICT operations, sales, purchase, repairs and upgrades), hence, Yaba is one of the go-to places for technology renaissance in Africa. And at this juncture it is imperative to focus on the efforts of the Nigerians, especially the efforts of the youth for them to piggyback on the agency of Internet, knowing that the advancement of the Internet has fuelled the growth of a "connected" and "plugged in" cohort of young people who are utilizing the cyberspace to improve their social status and create potential for economic and professional growth.

From this enclave, young people have also come together to create in-built apps that consumers buy and install on their phones, from the mobile appstore, there are android phones and software that can now scan documents, a pronouncing dictionary, the conversion of Word to PDF, and exciting games that keep young and old glued to the screen of their mobile phones; as "millennials" work hard to contribute to the development of Africa.

Conclusion

As Counted and Arawole, (2016) submit, since African millennials not only access and engage the Internet technology through fading Internet cafés, incubators, and increasing mobile access, concerns about the kind of opportunities such platforms provide become increasingly domineering as research further points that mobile Internet usage in Africa is among the highest. But it is alarming that, the access is not there. Citizens only struggle to acquire a modem, WLAN services or other means that are not long lasting or stable to access the internet.

Thus, it seems that innovation and the penetrated use of wireless technology on a daily basis in Africa has inspired a new breed of innovators who are developing life-saving applications, content, and platforms that are used to improve the standard of living (Jung et al. 2001: 512). The question is, like other developing countries, why will an average man on the street not be able to access internet without paying for it like in a cyber café or sorts. Internet should be included in one of the social amenities owing to the fact that, it links you to the outside world. And the surge behind these inventions is also determined by the opportunities available to create new ideas as technological and generational change: these changes often go hand in hand.

Therefore, enforced geo-restrictions experienced in Africa should be lifted to introduce a full Internet access which will advance an Internet-fuelled economy. This is the 21st century, most activities are done online, such as schooling, scholarship, interviews, shopping, vocational studies, and all essential aspects of human life and culture are practically lived on the internet.

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161

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