

# Social Media: Towards the Realisation of A Global Stance for the African Voice

by

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## Abstract

Social media usage has presented another platform for the African voice to be heard all over the world; with social media African people have the medium to tell their own story to the world. Thus, this paper aims at examining how technologically framed social media articulations have contributed to the realization of a global stance for the African voice.

**Key Words:** Africa, social media, Internet, African story, global influence.

## Introduction

According to Immanuel Wallerstein (1986), “European colonisation drew Africa into the world system marking the first phase of historical development that led to the incorporation of Africa into the global economy” (p. 111); this is not to say that Africa had no remarkable history before the colonisation process, for even Walter Rodney (2009) noted: “Africa had a meaningful past long before the coming of Europeans; Africans made their own history long after coming into contact with Europe, and indeed right up to the period of colonisation” (p. 132). He adds:

Studies on early African history are lacking for many reasons; the most obvious being that African history was for a long time considered by the colonialists as having so little value that it was not worth reconstructing. Another decisive factor is that studies of Africa were mainly carried out by European bourgeois anthropologists, whose philosophical outlook on ‘primitive societies’ caused them to separate African society from its historical context (p. 85).

Today there are records of the African story both from non-Africans whose assessment are from a sympathetic perspective with sufficient value for them to be respected and used in Africa, and from African historians who provide a syntheses of the continent's history by putting together relevant collections. And with the advent of the Internet, the African story from a non-sympathetic but objective point of view can reach out to the world. The Internet serves as a metaphor through which wider social and cultural anxieties are communicated; this is so typical in the case of the real African story juxtaposing with what the world presumed to be the African story. The Internet, being an object of glorification by its technophile advocates tends to transform human communication towards a more enlightened and creative existence. Worldwide accessibility to the Internet is one of the defining phenomena of the present times reshaping the world. *Statista*, the online statistics, market research and business intelligence portal that provides access to data from market and opinion research institutions, as well as from business organizations and government institutions describes social media tools as the lovechild of the Internet, which comes in many forms, including blogs, forums, business networks, photo-sharing platforms, social gaming, microblogs, chat apps, and social networks. Thus, *Statista* reports that the power of social networking is such that, the number of world users is expected to reach some 2.95 billion by 2020, around a third of Earth's entire population.

Taprial and Kanwar (2012) defined social media platforms as “all web based applications which allow for creation/exchange of user-generated content and enable interaction between the users” (p. 8). While Margaret Rouse (2016) described social media tools as “the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration”.

Social media are significant channels for information dissemination and communication around the world today. Internet and social media users are increasing at an alarming rate. With Internet technology, social media platforms have made the communication process faster, interactive, user friendly, and enabling user-generated contents. All these make the influence of social media usage far reaching; with good sides and bad sides to it. Social media usage has presented another platform for the African voice to be heard all over the world so that with social media, African people have a medium to tell their story to the world. African people have utilise this platform to make global statements and promote causes the world over. In the specific light of global possibilities brought on by changes in technology and the evolution of social media mediums, this paper examines how technologically framed social media have contributed to the realisation of a global stance for the African voice.

## **The Making of the African Image**

According to Martin Meredith (2011), during the scramble for Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, European powers staked claims to virtually the entire continent. At meetings in Berlin, Paris, London and other capitals, European statesmen and diplomats bargained over the separate spheres of interest they intended to establish in Africa. Their knowledge of the vast African hinterland was slight.

Hitherto Europeans had known Africa more as a coastline than a continent, and their presence had been confined mainly to small isolated enclaves on the coast used for trading purposes, and only in Algeria and in southern Africa had more substantial European settlement taken root.

Meredith added that the maps used to carve up the Africa were mostly inaccurate; large areas were described as terra incognita. When marking out the boundaries of their new territories, European negotiators frequently resorted to drawing straight lines on the map, taking little or no account of the myriad of traditional monarchies, chiefdoms and other African societies that existed on the ground. Nearly one half of the new frontiers imposed on Africa were geometric lines, lines of latitude and longitude, and other straight lines or arcs of circles. In some cases, African societies were rent apart: the Bakongo were partitioned between French Congo, Belgian Congo and Portuguese Angola; Somaliland was carved up between Britain, Italy and France. In all, the new boundaries cut through some 190 culture groups. In other cases, Europe's new colonial territories enclosed hundreds of diverse and independent groups, with no common history, culture, language or religion. Nigeria, for example, contained as many as 250 ethnolinguistic groups.

Meredith further explained that officials sent to the Belgian Congo eventually identified six thousand chiefdoms. Some kingdoms survived intact: the French retained the monarchy in Morocco and in Tunisia; the British ruled Egypt in the name of a dynasty of foreign monarchs founded in 1811 by an Albanian mercenary serving in the Turkish army. Other kingdoms, such as Asante in the Gold Coast (Ghana) and Loziland in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) were merged into larger colonial units. Kingdoms that had been historically antagonistic to one another such as Buganda and Bunyoro in Uganda were linked into the same colony. In the Sahel, new territories were established across the great divide between the desert regions of the Sahara and the belt of tropical forests to the south in Sudan, Chad and Nigeria, throwing together Muslim and non-Muslim peoples in latent hostility. And as the haggling in Europe over African territory continued, land and people became little more than pieces on a chessboard. Meredith quotes Britain's Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury's remark to a London audience thus: "We have been giving away mountains and rivers and lakes to each other, only hindered by the small impediment that we never knew exactly where they were" (p. 17). Meredith adds that Britain traded the North Sea island of Heligoland with the Germans for Zanzibar, and parts of northern Nigeria with the French for fishing rights off Newfoundland. France exchanged parts of Cameroon with Germany in return for German recognition of the French protectorate over Morocco. By the time the scramble for Africa was over, some 10,000 African polities had been amalgamated into forty European colonies and protectorates. Thus were born the modern states of Africa.

## **Social Media: The African Image and Global Influence**

Technological advancement in the media world is changing the way people receive and consume mass communication as well as influencing traditional media. The media of today is becoming more specialized and personal, as well as having more impact in reshaping society's reality.

Barbara Bray (2007) posits that society has always been impacted by technology; each invention has affected how people relate to one another and how perceptions and cultures have expanded or ended, thus technology has become a critical part of our everyday life.

Social media are products of technological advancement via very powerful tools that can influence and shape human behaviour and perception, and thus it has played a significant role in outbreaks of social protest and resistance. For example, the 2012 #OccupyNigeria, a socio-political protest movement that began in Nigeria on January 2, 2012 in response to the fuel subsidy removal by the Federal Government on January 1, 2012 characterised by civil disobedience, civil resistance, strike actions, demonstrations and online activism, with the use of social media services such as Twitter and Facebook being a prominent feature; the 2015 #FeesMustFall protest in South Africa, a student led protest movement that began in mid-October 2015 in response to an increase in fees at South African universities; in 2011 an Egyptian Facebook group begun in spring 2008, called on participants to wear black and stay home the day of the strike while bloggers and citizen journalists used Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, blogs and other media tools to report on the strike, alert their networks about police activity, organize legal protection and draw attention to their efforts, and the 2010-2011 Tunisian protests successes have been credited to social media tools in protest mobilization sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010, all which led to the democratization of the country, to free and democratic elections, and for all the movements and protest, a world attraction.

Hence, the role of social media platforms as instruments for mass mobilization is not totally reliance on its technological imperative, but rather on its creative use in response to aspirations and needs that pre-exist or at least exist independently of it. Thus social media usages can be described as a resource that can be utilized by people looking for a communication infrastructure to promote their cause or correct an impression. The relationship between social media mediums and image defining is both an interactive and dynamic one as social media tools provide a medium through which pre-existing sentiments can gain greater clarity, expressions and meaning. Therefore, a medium for the kind of interaction that can throw up new ideas, new symbols, new rituals and new identities that can also help stimulate the African voice across the globe, giving a voice to the once not known face of the Africa child who has never seen a foreigner in person. And in this context, Leonhard Gerd (2013) argues that:

Social media in particular have helped to create a new world; this new world is that of interactivity and accessibility. In the new media world, the audience is part of the content creation; they hold a strong point as to what they wish to be fed with. Their opinion counts because they are open to lots of options and will likely opt for the one that represents their need.

With that kind of all day, everyday dedication, social media mediums are vital not just for disseminating news, but also for forging relationships between citizenry, regardless of physical, economic or other types of distances. The payoff of such relationships, according to Gerd is more web visitors, as well as a better sense of what is going on around the world as it provides a variety of functions that touch upon every aspect of society, including private life. Hence, because of social media platforms, people are much more open about their personal and collective lives. Opinions are shared readily, relationships are publicly broadcast and news travels at the speed of light. Social media usages have also caused people to shy away from older, less effective forms of communication. In many ways, the changes in communication inspired by social media are beneficial to the world community. And thanks to social media, people living in different countries can share their lives on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and the likes through pictures, text updates and video chat. Important messages can easily be distributed to large groups of recipients, and people can network with each other for job leads, mentoring and even romance. In short, with social media, thousands and even millions of people are able to simultaneously create content, share experiences, build relationships and engage in other forms of productive work and meaningful activities.

Edosomwan (2011) add that social media usage is a phenomenon that has transformed the interaction and communication of individuals throughout the world; impacting many aspects of human communication. In contemporary society, according to Ohiagu and Okorie (2014), much of media communication finds expression in various social media platforms. Social media have also become embedded in our everyday lives that they largely fashion our perceptions, understandings, construction of meanings, and general view of reality or the world.

Within Africa, social media practices have materialised in unprecedented capacities. They have led to revolutions, encouraged, demanded and monitored best practices during elections and are also contributing to a larger dynamic of promoting growth on the continent through accountability and conversation. Today, social media mediums have a significant impact on the way we see the world. Networking, entertainment, and hard-hitting journalism within the digital sphere have become a part of everyday life; thought leaders now turn to the web to create a splash, influence others, and have their voices heard. Through the power of social media usage, organizations and individuals can reach audiences in staggering numbers not previously accessible through traditional media channels.

Social media applications have many purposes. According to Steve Lowisz (2014), it also allow users find their voice, keep in touch, measure the impact of services, build an audience, monitor trends, and stay informed. It has impacted the way audience view news, interaction, politics, learning, and business – nearly every aspect of the way people live today. Social media tools have enabled greater global awareness and organization, rewriting historical conceptions and causing significant changes in the way things are perceived. From hashtags (#) used by protestors, to live streaming of revolts and live comments and responses, social change has a new avenue for voices to be heard.

In regards to the African image, there have been a number of corrective waves about Africa emanating from discourse on different social media platforms. A typical instance was when Star Rapper William Roberts (popularly known as Rick Ross) posted a tweet calling Africa a country, the tweet caused quite a stir as African folk took to twitter with corrective posts mixed with name calling posts.



#### **William Robert's tweet**

Source: Twitter.com

Apparently, the star rapper is not the only one that thinks Africa is a country, it has been a misconception held over a period of time. The fight for it clarity led many in Africa to take steps such as the creations of a webpage called *Africa is a Country* founded by Sean Jacobs in 2009, growing out of the blog *Leo Africanus*. The site started as an outlet to challenge the received media wisdoms about Africa from a left perspective, informed by experiences of resistance movements to Apartheid. Since then it has grown in size to include a larger geographic scope and, crucially, launched the careers of a number of young African and diaspora writers, scholars and artists to a point where the South African newspaper *Mail and Guardian* concluded that: "Try as you might, it is hard not to turn an online corner in Africa without bumping into *Africa is a Country*." Today the website features online commentary, African focused writings, media criticism, videos, audio, and photography, becoming one of the leading intellectual voices in the African online media sphere.

Africa, the second largest continent in the world have often been described in bizarre ways and known only by features which are quite minimal and in some part of the continent non-existing. With particular reference to Africa being regarded as being all about animals, an example could be cited from a tweet made by American singer, songwriter and actress Stefani Joanne Germanotta (popularly know as Lady Gaga). She wrote:



Source: Twitter.com

Also, Jessica Dickerson noted that “during the 2014 World Cup, after the United States’ unexpected victory over Ghana, Delta Airlines sent out a tweet that warranted a universal SMH”. The tweet:

Congrats team #USA🇺🇸! Nice goal  
@clint\_dempsey @soundersfc! #USAvGHA  
#USMNT #DeltaSEA  
[pic.twitter.com/7C8iRzPzoa](https://pic.twitter.com/7C8iRzPzoa)

Reply Retweet Favorite More



Source: Black Voices

Dickerson adds that the tweet speaks volume, portraying that Africa’s most significant feature is animal. This portrayal is a phenomenon that has come a long way as an instance that could be cited in the 1988 American romantic comedy *Coming to America* wherein Prince Akeem (Eddie Murphy) is the prince of a wealthy African country named Zumunda who seeks a wife who will love him in spite of his title.



While in New York, Darryl (an American) displayed some act of African stereotyping, when he said to Akeem “wearing clothes must be a new experience for you” this symbolise Darryl’s conclusion that people in Africa are not used to wearing clothes. He further stressed the stereotype when he asked Akeem “what kind of games do you play in Africa? Chase the monkey?” further reiterating his believe that all people Africa do as sport is to play with animals. However to the other extreme, the country of Zumunda is pictured as a rich nation steeped in tradition and wealth which Olaniyan (1996) suggest essentially 'others' African people in Africa, and thus, he discusses how the forest and house scenes support the notion of an exotic Africa which shows Hollywood's idea of a 'civilized' culture in Africa; and finally he discusses how *Coming to America* freezes African culture in a one-dimensional frame. In retrospect, more research

should be conducted on this topic (the image of Africa in American films) in an effort to extract the negatives and make recommendations for a honest image of Africa and the African experience in Africa today, and yesterday.

## Social Media: Unveiling the Untold Stories of Africa

The process of uploading contents on African culture–values, lifestyle, dressing, arts, music, food, etc., on social media mediums afford the world to see and appreciate the various aspects of African cultures. Such information allow for a perpetuation of what Africa really represents, and thus enhance more than ever better opportunity for African countries to make their own socio-cultural statements via social media services as Ohiagu and Okorie (2014) infer that “social media can help African society develop, enrich and preserve its own cultural values and ensure that it is conspicuously represented in the emerging global culture”. And in an activist’s stance, in 2015, 22 year old Diana Salah (Somali), along with 17 year old Rachel Markham (Ghanaian) started a hashtag-led campaign to harness the power of social media usage in fighting global media stereotypes about Africa. They shared photos ranging from beautiful beaches, to cities that never sleep, to cultural celebrations, and had twitter users responding with enthusiasm, making the campaign go viral within a week of it being launched as people in Africa on twitter united and joined the fight against global media stereotypes about Africa using the hashtag #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou to show the world the natural beauty, diverse culture, happy and talented people of Africa.

Ife Olori (2015) quoted one of the organisers Diana Salah as saying: “I got involved because growing up; I was made to feel ashamed of my homeland, with negative images that paint Africa as a desolate continent. It is so important to showcase the diversity and beauty of Africa and with the mainstream media not up for the task, social media usage was the perfect outlet”. And Shahana Yasmin (2015) added that the international representation of Africa seems to focus mostly on disaster, images of emaciated children, war, widespread poverty and inhumane conditions.

Thus motivating young people in African to fight back against these stereotypes by posting pictures that show the world what Africa is to them. Not just serving as a balm to Africans who support the campaign, the #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou served as an eye opener for those who desire to see and travel the world. Through the posts they would know where to go. Yasmin (2015) quoted Markham as saying “I was tired of seeing only the negative aspect of Africa portrayed in the media, those of poverty, ethnic wars, and disease. We also want to show people that Africa is not only about animals, jungles and safaris. We have amazing skyscrapers, hotels, shopping malls and much more.” She went further to state that the heat of the campaign got the attention of the British Broadcasting Corporation s they called her to ask her thoughts on the subject.

The #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShows hashtag went viral beyond twitter as Facebook users joined in the fight sharing images of African fashion and design events; beautiful landscape; magnificent architecture, beautiful city views; African manufactured equipment; power generating fields; resorts and islands, classic stadiums; lush green cities and sites among others. Olori (2015) noted that the hashtag which was used in response to international media’s images and stories of Africa that have portrayed the continent as one that is full of suffering, underdevelopment, corrupt in addition to being riled in conflict and disease had African celebrities, public figures and politicians placing their weight behind the trend even as the hashtag attracted over 65,000 responses within twenty four hours of being shared. This promoted not only the positivity and confidence of Africa but also knowledge sharing of various cultures, places and activities in Africa that are rarely shown in the international media.

The hashtag #TheAfricaTheMediaNeverShowsYou thus served as the alternative voice of Africa that showcased the continent in ways in which African people and tourists see it. The possible change in African perceptions driven by this hashtag has the potential of motivating investment in Africa and contributing to the upward growth of the continent. On different social media platforms, there exist different accounts/handles that are committed to making statements of what truly is African. Social media tools generally, have helped portray Africa in the light it dwells in. With social media mediums today, some odd perceptions have been addressed with immediacy. For instance, the portrayal of African couture is available on almost all social media platforms; on Facebook there are accounts such as African Dresses, African Dress Styles, African Dress Designs; on Instagram – Asoebi Africa, Asoebi Worldz amongst other. In addressing the portrayal of African cuisines there are accounts such as African Food, African Recipes, African Food Festival on Facebook; African Food Yummy, African Food Network on Instagram; @africanfoodtime, @africanfoodmap, @afrifoodnet on Twitter etc. From these portrayals, people from around the world can replicate the couture as well as learn African cuisines; and on the other hand, the true African image is sustained.

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

In fact, according to Helen Jennings in *New African Fashion* (2011) there is a new wave of fashion designers who are emerging on the global stage ever since the late 1960's when Yves Saint Laurent and Paco Rabanne presented African-inspired collections, wherein the textiles, details, and colours of Africa have moved into the realm of high fashion; hence, in the past few years, young designers from Africa have emerged as people to watch in the fashion world. And moreover, apart from couture and cuisines, other matters of African concern have also gained worldwide momentum and support via social media usage. Today, social media show Africa to the world, but there is still a lot to be done and said, miles have been covered, but greater miles still remain untouched.

## **Conclusion**

Social media usage is about sociology and psychology more than technology. The tools will change, the networks will evolve, and the mediums for distributing content will grow. Along with it, behaviour will too continue to adapt, and so will the story of Africa grow in the right light. And in this, the world continues to expand and develop in various magnificent ways, and it is now possible to instantly communicate with people from different parts of the world, considering within the light that humanity has evolved in remarkable ways, but there is still a great deal of inequality and misunderstandings that exist in society, especially on a global level. Yet, Africa in many ways remains a mystery to many, although Africa represents 6 percent of Earth's total surface and 20.4 percent of its total land area with a United Nation's estimates as at September 11, 2017 of 1,252,051,129 people, equivalent to 16.36% of the total world population which encompasses about 1,500 -2,000 African languages with 54 independent countries. Nevertheless, there are many myths about Africa that people throughout the world believe to be true. Some of which are rooted in misinformation, lack of knowledge and stereotypes, but thanks to human social media usage, the African voice can now be heard round the globe and the activities of the continent can begin to attract more prominence in world affairs, signalling an Africa on the rise.

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