Chapter Forty-Five

DIALOGUE, FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND YOUTH PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN THE NIGERIAN SPACE: AN IMPERATIVE OF MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY (MIL)

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Introduction

The ability to access, analyze, and create media, evaluate and communicate information in a variety of formats including print and non-print materials is what has been described as Media and Information Literacy (MIL), the perspective alluded by (Reineck & Lubinski, 2015). The dawn of the 21st century ushered in an unprecedented global media development in various countries thereby increasing the volume of information produced through television, radio, print media and the Internet. Similarly, the rise of social media in particular has created a platform for promoting, among other things, social interaction between different groups of people (Onyancha, 2015). Access to quality information thus assumed a new dimension by which individuals are not only users and receivers of information but also actors and producers of its content. This development has in turn heightened the need for developing appropriate skills to empower people to adequately utilize the new global digital media.

From rights based approach, current digital age has already positioned Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as a fundamental prerequisite for citizens to actualize their rights to freedom of information and expression. More so, from the best interest perspective of the citizenry, it not only fosters human need to communicate freely, express one's opinion and share positive ideas and open up wider conversations with others as critical aspect of human nature but also deepens democratic practices. Research has shown that concerns for MIL are advocated on the need for the public to be liberated from the oppressive effects of institutionalised public media (Reineck & Lubinski, 2015). Similar concerns have also arisen out of the need to re-assess and address issues that affect women, children and youths as regards information obtained from television, the internet and other forms of media which often portray violence and stifles expressions and others like exposure to graphic materials, amongst many.

In Africa, mass illiteracy looms over the larger society, and is reflected sometimes in the type of political democratic practice where older politicians hijack state youth councils recruiting youths as thugs to settle political scores with opponents, rig elections, cause electoral violence and form pseudo political parties. This is simply because not many of the youth in the state councils are literate and lack knowledge in accessing media contents talk more of analysing them. The youth seem to suffer from the ability to harmonise their thoughts and engage institutions that can assist and monitor them to achieve their outcomes. For instance, they lack mechanism to evaluate violence or discriminations against them. Along these fault lines are the cormobidity brought about by the constant social change accompanying social problems of globalisation, migration, internal displacement by the increasing internationalisation of terrorist groups such as of Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Islamic State for West Africa Province, ISWAP and their individual and group sympathisers.

The growing phobic disorders of Afrophobia and Xenophobia has also narrowed the democratic space and reshaped dialogues that need sensitive ability to access, transform content, and create media, evaluate and communicate information in a variety of formats that can change the seemingly dangerous narrative as they are presently and weakens

the foundational structures of participatory democracy in Africa in Nigeria in particular. MIL is therefore premised on the concerns that the expanded media of ICTs require the ability by individuals particularly the youths to sift through these sources in questioning the authenticity of all forms of information and equally applying the sifted information for an improved democratic practice in Nigeria. Hence, the discourse around MIL by countries including many developing countries has been very impactful in helping to address some of the challenges experienced in the new digital era and of course the provision of new media platforms that youths can actively engage with to changing the status quo and deepening democratic practice.

The significant progress made so far in MIL has been attributed to the global effort by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) in placing the concept of MIL at the centre of international politics and the drive towards curricula integration in the educational sector ((Tuominen, & Kolainen, 2012). While previous media education mainly emphasised the negative effects of the media and sought to protect citizens from its harmful influences, the discourse around MIL as championed by UNESCO today seeks to empower people with the critical skills and ability to evaluate diverse sources of information from the media and apply them to different developmental strides be it in the area of political participation in the context of discourse. UNESCO's pioneering effort has thus played a key role in developing an understanding of MIL at the international level as a composite of traditional media literacy, journalism and information literacy that is essential for the sustainable development of the global society in the digital era (Reineck & Lubinski, 2015).

Closely allied to the concept of MIL is the issue of the freedom of access to information and expression. Access to information is a universal right as contained in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). Human rights describe basic, internationally agreed upon standards that are essential for people to survive and live in dignity, which are inherent to the individual, inalienable and universal.

The right of the individual is a fundamental aspect of MIL, which is in agreement with the UDHR and the UN Convention on the Rights of the

Child. This right enables the exchange and development of opinions and it is a condition or an important basis for other rights, such as participation in public affairs and cultural life (UN 2011). Hence, a human rights-based approach to MIL seeks to encourage the right to the freedom of expression of the individual by which he/she is able to access, use and create new media and be able to identify violations of these rights where they exist (Reineck & Lubinski, 2015). Against this background, the discussion from this paper seeks to explore the concept of MIL and freedom of information as important tools in the promotion of dialogue and participatory democracy with a focus on the following issues:

The role of MIL in ensuring free access to information

The current media information space in most countries is saturated with diverse topical issues ranging from politics, education, sports, entertainment and so on. Many people today struggle to cope with the multitude of options and pitfalls of the digital age and few make active choices to carefully sift the contents of such information products (Reineck & Lubinski, 2015). It is also noted that current issues in today's society, mainly political, are discussed at length in the media which makes it imperative that citizens are able to find new ways to consciously participate and shape the flow of information in ways that affect their lives.

The fundamental concern of MIL is the need to enlighten and empower the youth with the needed competencies and critical thinking skills for accessing suitable media information sources. In this regard also, the right of the freedom of access to information, which is encapsulated in the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), enacted by most countries, is of valid consideration for ensuring access to government information and freedom of expression (Denedo, 2011). The FOIA enhances human dignity because of its ability to enable more effective individual decision-making, whether at personal, professional or political levels. It also facilitates democratic participation by enabling citizens to contribute effectively in decision-making on issues that affect them. The FOI Right as encapsulated in the FOI Act implies that government should not restrict or prevent a person from receiving

information from another person who is willing to impart to him. The point that is reinforced here is the fact that information in itself is fundamental and any information that is valid that can help redefine the youth's involvement in different spheres of human endeavours particularly, democratic participation should be made available and youths should be encouraged to access such information.

The concept of freedom as encapsulated or enshrined in the Freedom of Information Act is an expression of the rights of people globally to freely exercise themselves in an open dialogue without let or hindrance. To demonstrate the importance of this right Roosevelt cited in Scilly, (n.d) postulated the four freedoms and listed the freedom of speech and expression as the first freedom before the freedom to worship God and lastly the freedom from want and freedom from fear. Omotayo (2015) explained that its merits has long been recognised and entrenched globally as demonstrated in its inclusion as an extension of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and protected in International Human Rights Treaties, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and also the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights 1948. Article 19 of the Declaration states thateveryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinion without interference and to seek, receive and impart information through any media regardless of frontiers.

In essence, the Freedom of Information Act discourse emerged to protect the right of expression across frontiers for all and sundry; thus within the Nigerian context this is situated in the 1999 Nigerian Constitution in section 39(1) to guarantee freedom of Information at all levels for all citizens not just Journalists (Melami, 2009). Citizens in the democratic process have seen the FOIA as a powerful tool for fighting corruption, ensuring transparency in governance and encouraging participation. Through MIL and the collaboration of government, media agencies and other stakeholders, efforts can be made to promote and publicise the FOIA and ensure greater public awareness and understanding of how it can be used to encourage freedom of access to information and expression by citizens (Dunu & Ugbo, 2014).

Deepening Intercultural Dialogue and Participation in Democracy among Young People through MIL

The media functions as a means for promoting cultural expression and cohesion especially between countries of the world. The media has the power to shape the perceptions, beliefs and attitudes of people by disseminating information that fosters interaction, dialogue and mutual understanding. It functions as "an advocate and social actor in its own right, while respecting pluralistic values" (KAICIID, 2014:14).

The youth rely on the media to explain information that will help them develop their self- identity, understand people from different religious, ethnic, and cultural beliefs or backgrounds so that they can engage in dialogue to understand each other's differences. The understanding of this expectation is that the media desists from issues that incite, discriminate against individuals in any society by presenting an accurate, balanced and fair information system. The 16th session of the United Nations general assembly resolution adopted states it this way "combating intolerance, negative stereotyping and stigmatisation of, and discrimination, incitement to violence and violence against persons based on religion or belief". Therefore, the youth need to identify and understand the role the media plays in culture and to see the cultural diversity that exists among the people so as to be able to sift and engage all media information for the benefit and betterment of society.

Traditional and social media contents should be channeled to finding avenues to peaceful and harmonious co-existence and not for stigmatisation and negative stereotyping of people. According to Article 22 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, culture is "the way people express themselves, think, love hate ...it is every aspect of human existence". Thus, Intercultural Dialogue is the ability to find a common language for understanding and respecting cultural differences. Like the youth in other parts of the world, the Nigerian youth is confronted with a lot of issues such as terrorism, natural disasters, racism, poverty, xenophobic attacks and so on, which have continued to alter his understanding of the globalised world and his ability to have respect for diversity and the consciousness to live peacefully with others. How the youth relates with other people from different

backgrounds in a society that is dynamic and evolving is crucial to the growth of democracy since they are seen as change agents.

The campus is a melting point for this multicultural, multi-ethnic group of students. The administrative policy of university is such that the catchment area for admissions reflects this multicultural picture of the larger society. So, even at the larger society if intercultural dialogue is not promoted because of a backward or illiterate society, the university environment, which is more literate automatically, engenders tolerance and acceptance. An example of this is the formation of diverse ethnic associations on campus. When each of these associations has their cultural days they invite other people from other cultures and they explain their culture and ways of relating with each other. This is hardly found in larger society. What you find is that cultural tolerance and transmission among students is more open on campuses than in the larger society where there are certain restrictions. In the same way students are allowed to perform their religious obligations and activities freely and to accord respect to other religious rites of other groups without hindrance.

In this way, young people are able to strengthen their understanding of cultural and religious diversities and hold on to the worldview as they grow. It is in the light of this therefore that the focus of UNESCO's Media and Information Literacy and Intercultural Dialogue (MILID), and the Universities Twinning Network (UNITWIN) become exemplary in its attempt to contribute to finding solutions to misunderstandings, inequalities and other growing complexities of our modern societies, even within the Universities where more of our young people are learning about themselves as individuals and the interconnectedness of society and how to apply their rights as members of a global community (MILID Yearbook 2013).

"African Communication Systems" is a course that is designed to help students understand the myths, legends, and channels of communication and how to apply culture in information dissemination. As a practical aspect of the course, what a lecturer can do to make the lecture interesting and valuable to the students is allowing each student to provide before other classmates a class performance, a knowledge of his/her cultural /religious beliefs, attitudes and other ethnic

dispositions. What this does is to create knowledge of similarity of cultures and appreciation of other people's perceptions and ways of life. It is also symbolic of the fact that culture is an inevitable aspect of life and is not isolated. With this knowledge also, the students are able to respect each other's diversity and dialogue from an informed position when the need arises. UNESCOs focus and action plan states: "Safeguarding and promoting cultural heritage as a shared resource for dialogue and sustainable development, fostering creative diversity, countering ignorance and intolerance, strengthening intercultural competencies: all play a determinant role for intercultural dialogue" (Ahmimed and Quessada-Montano (2019; UNESCO, 2002, Articles 1, 2 & 3). All people have the right to cultural expression in their language of choice, and have the right to access the means of expression and dissemination of their culture (Articles 5 & 6). Intercultural dialogues are considered a tool to develop more inclusive societies and prevent exclusion, stereotyping and discrimination (García Agustín 2012).

The significant progress made so far in MIL has been attributed to the global effort by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) in placing the concept of MIL at the centre of international politics and the drive towards curricula integration in the educational sector ((Tuominen, & Kolainen, 2012). Among the youths, active use of the Internet in socially interactive platforms that provide them with pleasure and a relative level of autonomy have been on the increase. This new context of social interaction is narrowing the physical relationship between young people and their immediate environment and alienating them from other people and the society (World Youth Report, 2003).

In Africa, democracy has experienced critical challenges particularly in the areas of leadership, transparency and accountability, which have hindered good governance, and participatory democracy in the political system (Igali, 2014). Among the youths, there has been an increasing political apathy in the democratic process, which has hindered their participation in civic activities. Evidences abound as to the involvement of youths in political participation prior to independence in Nigeria and afterwards in order to contribute and bring about changes in the political system. So, throughout history of most nations, the youths are

the most influential and creative group and should be seen as fundamental to every democratic process. Of note is the "Not too young to run" movement which created opportunities for increased youth participation in politics. The signing into law the bill by President Muhammadu Buhari in 2019 as part of amendments in Nigeria's electoral law reduced the age for presidential candidates from 40 to 35 and from 35 to 25 for candidates into the national assembly.

As a result of the Bill, there is a positive trend in youth participation, with youth candidacy increasing from 21% in 2015 to 34.2% in the 2019 elections. Despite these changes, the number of youths aged 18–29 (based on the youth definition given by the National Youth Policy organization), voted into elective positions in Nigeria is less than 1%. Further, there are no youth in the new cabinet formed by President Buhari, and neither is there a youth in the National Assembly. This is despite youths making up over 67% of registered voters, on average, which means that whoever they decide to vote for is sure of winning the election (Adojo-Adebanjoko, 2019).

The participation of youths in democracy largely depends on a lot of factors, which include economic and socio- cultural factors. Youths have constantly been faced with challenges of unemployment, poverty, lack of education as well as discrimination. The necessity of using the youth as a creative force to challenge the existing conditions through a democratic process that ensures inclusiveness cannot be over-emphasised. Within the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, youths have been known to carefully chart their path towards future political participation by active involvement in the Students Union Government (SUG) and the National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS). It is from these formations that a miniature Nigeria or society with its diversity in terms of ethnic, religious and cultural differences collides. From these emerged associations of students from different states each with its political and socio-cultural makeup for instance, National Association of Plateau State Students, etc. and each of them has a nuanced understanding of the other in preparing for future political democratic participation. It is at this point that the youth voices are reflected as active and meaningful to the global development agenda. Participation

and dialogue is indispensable to democracy; for democracy to succeed therefore, it is imperative that an avenue for dialogue is created for young people to participate in the democratic process.

The political dimension of MIL requires that media literacy education is needed to provide the cognitive and social support for civic engagement by youths. This conception of MIL can only be actualized through effective collaboration between the government, educational institutions and other civil society organizations in developing pedagogies that promote youth engagement in the respective communities where information is created and interpreted for the purpose of political empowerment (Tuominen, & Kolainen, 2012).

The recent unbundling of the curriculum of Mass Communication studies in Nigerian universities opens up new frontiers for the youth to engage with pedagogical tools and incentives or opportunities that will assist in democratic participation effectively. Similarly, the role of the media in this regard is the recognition of the right of youths to have full access to accurate information and their ability to participate in political issues that directly affect their lives. Young people spend a lot of time on social media sourcing for information but rarely political information. However, lately there has been a migration from conventional blogs to social media blogging. Most students and young people find platforms like Facebook or Instagram a ready-made channel to air their views on socio-political and economic issues. The comments spark an online debate among friends with many sharing such posts on other platforms. One of the social media blogging group for instance by a student in the University of Jos is "PLATEAU INTELLIGENSIA" where almost on a weekly basis group members post opinions that generate discussions on Nigeria and Plateau state politics. Other youth navigate their way on these platforms mostly downloading, and forwarding audio and visual massages and texts mostly from unverified sources, rather than using the technology for civic participation. This trend has contributed in no small measure to increase in hate speech, fake news, propaganda, especially during political rallies and elections and other types of misinformation in the society.

Civic engagement can arise from digital media use, media organisations can therefore encourage youth participation by:

1. Creating awareness and interest on how media and digital information systems work in supporting good governance initiatives in their communities.

2. Helping young people to develop a critical attitude and knowledge of the importance of interacting with journalists and editors of various media through the new digital media environment.

3. Encourage youths on the need to demand media quality of information sources particularly on governance issues in order to encourage them to participate in the decision-making processes of their communities.

Participatory democracy is inclusive in nature and rests on the notion of a community of citizens who are united by a common purpose to perform their civic duties (Lawal, 2019). Young peoples' inclusion in this process is important, as it will enable them to realize their potential and build self-confidence in the governance structures of their communities.

Enhancing sustainable development strategies

Youth as change agents in the development of societies and growth of democracy implies that they are not simply beneficiaries, but also stakeholders in the socio-economic, political and cultural conditions of their societies. As active voices in the political sphere, the media creative processes can be successful if young people are allowed to participate by lending their voices in democratic activities using their creative skills to organise, and mobilise others to express themselves freely and to be tolerant and avoid self-seeking ideologies. This is the most effective way to achieve stable and sustainable peace. In developed climes, youths have found non-violent ways of confronting their non-inclusion in governance because they are given the right information that recognizes their basic human rights as well as the chance to exert their influence appropriately.

MIL is a lifelong learning process and all encompassing. Within the University system therefore, MIL processes should be extended to all units and divisions. For instance, non-teaching units closely related to

young people, the Student Affairs Directorate. Since the directorate is responsible for allocating hostel accommodation to students among other duties, under no circumstance should students of the same religious or ethnic background allocated the same room. Allocations are expected to reflect the ethnic diversity of the country. This will foster intercultural awareness, tolerance, unity, identity and peaceful coexistence. Student's common rooms in the universities are meant to be where students can meet-up, interact, watch or listen to media programmes as they also share thoughts and ideas together in harmony. The common rooms are hardly functional in most cases in recent years in most universities across Nigeria. The common rooms should be resuscitated and students should be allowed to take ownership of it by management of universities and other tertiary institutions. In this way an avenue is created for conversations to take place and reduces the level of radicalisation and marginalisation on our campuses.

There have been debates about the role that students can play in the academic advancement of their teachers. One of the aspects of the debates is allowing them to assess their teachers or lecturers for promotion by the quality of teaching rendered, mentorship, amount of paper and research with students, the ratio of students who failed course as assessed by external examiners. This is commendable because it shows that young people are important contributors to producing an intellectual group for the improvement of societies.

Similarly, allowing students to have a say in the selection of Vice Chancellors implies that the students are equal partners in the selection of who is responsible for them. Since young people are dynamic innovators of audio and visual texts and images on the social media, the Ministry of Youth Development can harness their competencies by opening up new online applications like youth information management system on its websites that are youth friendly to allow youths engage in national conversations. This would be on the Authorities dashboard for easy analysis and policy guide for youth engagement without compromising the future of democratic growth and development of the country.

Training and retraining of young people at the State youth councils

would expose the youths to negative trends where older politicians form pseudo party platforms to play to the gallery for money and hijack state youth councils, recruit them as thugs to settle political scores with opponents. Youth councils should be allowed to run independently.

Conclusion

The high points of this paper indicate that pluralism, freedom of information and expression and the right to information is an imperative for Media and information literacy. Since information plays a key role in reinforcing and strengthening decision-making by young people who are influencers in their generation and the future, reliable and right information from those in government is also crucial to prepare them for their future roles. Likewise, the youth have shown readiness and interest in their quest to explore the vast opportunities displayed by the social media to deconstruct messages, engage and hold interactions with others. Hence, the level of convergence of various communication processes changing relationships and dialogue or conversations in Africa and Nigeria in particular is challenging the youths to participate in democracy.

From the foregoing therefore, it can be seen that the media and MIL are important tools for freedom of information, intercultural dialogue and democratic participation. The attributes of MIL will continue to have an impact on youth providing access to tools on the one hand and the ability to process information as well as transform it into a robust conversation to immensely challenge African youths on the other hand. Popular youth culture lacks coordination, institutionalization. This is revealed in weak legal framework as seen in the "Not too young to Run" bill that is not practically feasible considering the youth gender gap and access to resources. Youths remain key to developments around the world; therefore all youth populations reached and included in decision -making will enhance their interest and propensity to engage in community development, political actions or other forms of public engagement. The youth can also provide relevant information with regards to policies that affect young people such as roads, hospitals, education, security, poverty, employment etc.

Understanding MIL will increase the competence level of young

people to create a more accurate and subtle understanding of other people, compelling them to respect pluralism and avoid stereotypes as well as applying media content critically for citizen empowerment.

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