

**THE SOCIAL MEDIA IMPERATIVES FOR ENHANCING
GOVERNANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY**

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ABSTRACT

Governance does not solely rest with government; but also with all sectors of the society that must contribute to social and economic development. Hence, this article is holed on the expectations of social media content providers and other stakeholders, as partners of government in its effort to achieve purposeful direction in the comity of states. Thus, this is an attempt to use this medium to illuminate how all of us can use social media to contribute to governance; and in the process, improve on the service delivery mechanisms.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the last decades of the 20th century, developed countries brought significant changes in almost all aspects of life including economy, education, transport, communication, health and public service delivery. Also, many initiatives have been taken at the international level to support the developing countries to build their ICT infrastructure. That was why delegates from 175 countries across the world assembled at the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva in 2003; as well as the Summit on Information and Communication Technologies in Tunis in 2005. These gatherings recognised ICT as a key development enabler. They agreed to work together for building a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, international law which is anchored on respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights so that people everywhere can create, access, utilise and share information and knowledge.

In many studies, social media is identified as an important tool for government service delivery and public-service engagement. For example, Freeman and Loo (2009) suggest that governments can improve their efficiency, user convenience and citizen involvement by using social media. There are varieties of social media applications that can be used by government agencies for different purposes such as public hearings, departmental coordination, public service innovation, experience sharing and problem-solving. It is also widely recognised that social media empowers the citizen to ask government questions, thereby helping to strengthen democracy. Given this growing use of social media in government offices, popular social media platforms are being gradually transformed into

powerful communication tools for reaching and engaging with parts of the community that traditional communications struggle to reach.

Observations about the government-citizens relationship on social media have given rise to two sides of a coin in Nigeria:

1. Different governments and their agencies see the presence of citizens on social media as mere antagonism; and as such, they fail to optimise the potentials that could accrue from positively engaging the citizenry on those platforms.
2. On the other hand, citizens see social media as avenues to openly condemn everything they feel the government is not doing well; and as such, they engage in the spread of unauthorised information, misinformation and disinformation – fake news – and as such fail to understand governance involves every citizen.

Within these contexts, this presentation focuses on social media utilisation in enhancing governance as well as ensuring that service delivery is communicated to, with and assimilated by the people.

2.0 THE OBJECTIVES

At the end of this presentation, we would be able to:

- i. ascertain the relevance of social media in governance and service delivery;
- ii. identify the benefits of social media in governance and service delivery;
- iii. note the strategies for effective social media engagement in governance and service delivery; and
- iv. Articulate ways of using social media content to promote public service delivery as the government's business brand.

3.0 THE METHODS

The presenter adopted a desk research method involving textual analysis of existing literature and analysis of experiential information recorded through unstructured content analysis of online and social media walls and pages.

4.0 THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is one of the influential theories in mass media research propounded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1974. It is an audience-centred approach and based on the origins of needs from social and psychological perspectives to understand mass communication (Roy, 2009). Basically, UGT is trying to interpret individuals' motives when they choose a specific medium; thus it focuses on understanding "what people do with media" (Katz, 1959). This theory assumes that the audience does not passively receive the messages and ideas from media; instead, the audience is autonomous and has the ability to choose specific media for gratifying basic psychological needs. This means that the audience's satisfactions are dominant and have a significant impact on social media trends. The success of an information system depends on repeated social media engagement by the users.

Another relevant theory focuses on social media in government and is Mergel's (2013) framework for social media interactions in the public sector. In her proposal, Mergel classified social media strategies around three general categories depending on mission and tactics:

(a) Push (Transparency): Public administrations develop unidirectional communication, with the purpose of sending public information to increase transparency and to improve trust and accountability. This is achieved by providing information;

(b) Pull (Participation): The purpose of public agencies is to generate engagement with citizens, improve decision-making and get feedback from them. This is achieved through creating room for interaction; and

(c) Networking (Building Networks): Social media is used for the generation of networks for citizens' collaboration and the possibility to co-produce public services. This is achieved by connecting with different social media outlets such as the Abia Online Publishers through the collaborative tools of their (content sharing, conversations, subscriptions...).

Recently, DePaula, Dincelli, and Harrison (2018) added an extra category to this framework named **symbolic presentation**. This new dimension refers to the massive use that public administrations make of social media technologies for self-promotion and marketing through the use of favourable presentations, political positions, symbolic acts and institutional branding.

The two theoretical orientations show that social media are heavily used to increase public participation so as to influence online users of social media sites to harness their perceptions about the government. After all, the goal is to inform the public, improve transparency and participation in government programmes as well as enhance collaboration with service recipients.

5.0 SOCIAL MEDIA: WHAT ARE THEY?

'Social media' refer to "web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, rate and search for content and information without having to log in to any specific portal site or portal destination. These tools become 'social' in the sense that they are created in ways that enable users to share and communicate with one another" (Bohler-Muller & Van der Merwe, 2011, p.3). There are many types of social media platforms; but, we shall highlight some of them that most of us are familiar with within this part of the world. They may, according to Ihechu (2017) citing Dickson (2013), include:

Social Networking and Media Sharing Sites: Social networking platforms allow users to connect with other people who have similar interests, likes, and experiences. These types of platforms allow you to share and consume information (text, image, video) across your network and to join, create, and participate in groups. Examples include Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram, Snapchat, Flickr.

Microblogging: Microblogging platforms allow users to share content and information in short, little blurbs. Generally, you are limited to a small number of characters. They include: Twitter and Tumblr

Blogging & Publishing Networks: Blogs are written content or video content (sometimes referred to as vlogging) published for others to read, view, comment and share. There are numerous platforms out there, so here are a few: WordPress, Blogger, LiveJournal

Bookmarking & Content Curation Networks: Pinterest, Wikipedia, Flipboard.

Discussion Forums: Reddit, Quora, Digg

Consumer Review Networks: Yelp, Zomato, TripAdvisor

Social Shopping Networks: Polyvore, Etsy, Fancy

For the purpose of this presentation, I would want us to see online news sites as social media because they employ some of these social media platforms in their daily activities. Also, considering they, the online presence of the conventional media would further be an added prospect for government to explore in driving home its service delivery efforts.

6.0 GOVERNANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Simply put, **governance** refers to all aspects of the way the government fulfils its job for societal and economic development. It is a process of governing by which all governmental, as well as non-governmental organisations, civil societies, private sectors, are involved in the process of policymaking and the process of implementation of those policies. In short, the processes that lead to policymaking and its implementation can be called governance. According to the World Bank document 'Governance and Development (1992), there are four key dimensions of governance. They are:

- i. Public sector management:
- ii. Accountability
- iii. The legal framework for development
- iv. Transparency and information

We are all familiar with these concepts. However, public accountability depends on three indicators, namely:

- The interrelationship between public services and people,
- Relationship between political leaders and supervisors of public services or private services,
- Aims and objectives of supervisors of public services.

Accountability has been considered in terms of satisfactory service delivery to the citizens and how much the people participate in the policymaking process of governance. This is why social media engagement becomes necessary in modern governance – connecting the people through social media.

Service delivery entails the provision of sufficient, affordable and quality basic services; and this is considered a core function of government. Delivery of services (water, sanitation, waste management and housing) correlates closely with the health and well-being of residents and citizens. However, in many developing countries, delivery is constrained by challenges of coordination, governance, finance and capacity, which are aggravated by the pace and scale of urbanisation and industrialisation. Governments at all levels play important roles in service delivery, regulating, facilitating and collaborating with other stakeholders and institutions. Governance for basic services covers the full range of arrangements through which governments and other stakeholders work together to install, deliver and manage services.

Better governance does not necessarily mean that the government must provide all services, but it needs to ensure that the poor can access adequate services. This entails working with service providers (public or private), small-scale vendors, civil society organisations and low-income residents. Above all, communicating the government's effort towards service delivery becomes essential because; the citizens need to be aware of the existence of the provisions so as to access them. This gives birth to the question: how are social media relevant?

7.0 RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN GOVERNANCE AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Social media is rapidly being adopted in the public sector for disseminating information, providing services and keeping in touch with the citizens. It is now therefore a necessary part of public sector communication. These channels are designed for content generation, sharing and collaboration, interaction, participation and feedback. In contrast to websites, people are not limited to be passive viewing of content; social media platforms enable their users to create content and share with others, and maintain relationships that were not previously possible with a large and extended network of contacts (Shabnam et al. 2013).

Communication, collaboration and transparency across government departments are a welcome development. Government adoption of social media is on the rise, so much so that a recent report by the Partnership for Public Service says – it is “not just a passing trend, rather, an important mechanism for advancing government effectiveness.” Social media can connect large populations and remote groups, and content can be customised and updated almost instantly, at a relatively low cost.

Social media provides an interactive two-way communication mechanism through which the government can measure public sentiment with respect to new laws or key policy changes. By gathering feedback, ideas, suggestions, and absorbing these into the policy-making process, the government can rejuvenate the concept of direct democracy. It can also use social media for, communicating emergencies, enabling economic development, political engagement and policy feedback and real-time response.

The use of social media during a crisis is very significant in any natural disaster events, such as floods, wars, pandemics, epidemics, etc. (Aisha et al., 2015). The Covid-19 pandemic not only challenged the health system of nations but also affected the whole world. In order to give information to the citizen about the covid-19 pandemic, governments did rely on traditional methods of disseminating information in one way communication through

television, radio, newspaper, flyers, public. They engaged in social and mobile media communication to sensitise the populace. The aim was to personalise information and make sure no one was left out in the fight. Governments took full advantage of social media to minimise mass panic, mix-ups, distress and anxiety (Chen et al., 2020). Due to social media characteristics such as openness, dialogism and engagement, it offers significant benefits in delivering information to the members of the public.

From the foregoing, social media are relevant to governance and service delivery in the following ways:

- i. **Political participation:** governments have provided formal online channels for citizens to report a crime, comment on policy, or petition for change. Largely this is restricted to a small elite of internet users, and government websites are not popular. Citizens often use social media to organise between themselves for activism and protest.
- ii. **Transparency and accountability:** Citizens have used social media to communicate reports and map issues in society, which has increased pressure on governments to respond. Online participation especially in social media allows interaction between the government and the public. An example could be seen in posting comments on the Facebook pages, short messages on Twitter to breaking news and information. The public can directly give responses and comments on the posting which encourage them to share their opinions, discussions and comments in interactive communication.
- iii. **Peace Building:** Social media have been used to monitor violence, which can support peacebuilding, although media can also be used to incite violence.
- iv. **Private sector:** Social media used by businesses can increase transparency and customer communication, as well as create new forms of leadership. Online collaboration allows the government to partner with the public through the decision making, identification of problems and finding solutions. This is where Abia Online publishers come in.
- v. **Internal governance:** New legislation and regulation of social media is controversial. Some online hate speech constitutes a crime, and some governments have shut down Internet services in an attempt to control social media.

8.0 SOCIAL MEDIA IN GOVERNANCE: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Social media networks are highly likely to promote the voices of the poor majority for good democratic governance of service delivery. They are deployed creatively and proactively, with a strong emphasis on interactive and flexible platforms that elicit feedback and guarantee openness without sacrificing security and confidentiality.

An interactive platform encourages inputs, builds social capital, promotes community/government engagement and collaboration and inspires the exchange of ideas. On social media, people can engage in direct dialogue with politicians, civic officials, and even entire government agencies. The benefits of social media in governance include but are not limited to:

1. **Crisis Communication:** The spread of COVID-19 is unprecedented in almost every aspect of the public sector, including communications. Public information

professionals, like you, are being asked to provide regular updates in uncertain times to an anxious public.

2. Citizen Engagement: An engaged audience is a happy audience. And when you keep the public engaged, you will be able to keep them informed about the policy and issues that matter most to them. In the process of engaging the citizens, there are two more gains:

- **Building Trust** – Social media gives you an opportunity to be more transparent. And when you open yourself up, the public will trust you more.
- **Humanising Brand** – Too often people forget that there are actual people behind agencies and government offices. Social media gives you an opportunity to show audiences that government is human too.

3. Setting the Record Straight: Social media are a great breeding ground for misinformation and disinformation. Use to identify inaccuracies and respond accordingly. No need to address everything – some content may be too ridiculous to warrant a response. But if you see that a significant number of people are falling for or spreading falsehoods, using official platforms helps to set the record straight.

4. Testing Messages: Social media is a fantastic way to test messages with the public. When a government agency is looking for a way to connect with the populace, using social media is great because of the accruing benefits such as:

- Low stakes
- Instant feedback
- Craft effective messages from comments
- Being abreast with the trends through audience responses

5. Saving Costs: Traditional media outreach is expensive. Social media can dramatically cut those costs. Instead of spending on advertising, government entities can now leverage more cost-efficient social platforms to raise awareness about issues the public needs to know about. After all, these are platforms the citizens already use.

Like all new technology, social media has its risks. Sharing information on social media can sometimes lead to voluntary or involuntary sharing of sensitive or classified information and instigation of violence and crime in society. These are visible risks, but they can be mitigated by creating a strong social media strategy. That is why scholars accept people-oriented laws to regulate social media use. The wheels of change have already been set in motion. If nurtured and used effectively, social media can set the precedent for a new era of government-citizen engagement.

8.0 STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA HANDLING

As we talk about the strategies government agencies should adopt, stakeholders, social media managers and citizens as parts of governance, should follow up on what government does with social media in relation to service delivery. By so doing, every sector would be in a

position to engage purposefully with social media. In the course of my research, I have come to identify two types of social media accounts: Soapboxes and dinner parties.

A soapbox social media account focuses on itself. They use social media to broadcast their messages and issues without engaging their audience. A dinner party, on the other hand, invites audiences in and creates a dialogue with them. They encourage discussion and engagement between the host (you) and the guests (your audience).

Obviously, every government agency, online news host and what have you would want have a dinner party social media account. The following strategies, therefore, become paramount for successful social media engagement for service delivery.

- 1. Nose for Relevant Conversations:** The first thing to focus on as a social media manager is listening to your audience. This is because the audience determines what you hear and consequently know. Before writing any post, there is a need to know the audience and constituents better than they know themselves. A lot of social media marketers – private or public – make the mistake of making posts before they even know what their audience wants to see from them. This results in low engagement and a very ineffective social media account. The keyword, therefore, is Research.
 - What do they want?
 - What are they struggling with?
 - And how is your social media account going to engage with them to solve the problems?

Thus, social media can be a great opportunity for government agencies to answer any questions the public might have. Not only that but also there should be a team of people who read and respond to every post or comment.

- 2. Educate the Audience with Valuable Content:** One edge government social media accounts have on private ones is the fact that they have access to a massive amount of information such as environmental, scientific, and health data. As such, people instantly recognise the account as credible and trustworthy. Therefore, make sure the content of the pages are reliable enough not to make them become disappointed. In the end, you can usurp your credibility as a government agency by educating your audience.

- 3. Be Simple:** Remember that most of the audience is looking at your posts while scrolling through hundreds of others. In a crisis you are “competing” with other messages – so make your content as easy to consume and share as possible. To achieve this, use simple graphics, avoid large blocks of text, and try to get your main point across without asking people to click on a link or watch a lengthy video.

- 4. Engage the Citizens:** By engaging with the constituents on social media, the government would be able to improve service delivery and citizen satisfaction. It might be tempting to pause social media engagement in times of crisis in order to focus on urgent messaging, do not stop. Being responsive is critical when many services are suspended and people are not able to communicate in person with public

agencies. Social media can be its own sort of public forum and place for government officials to go back and forth with communities. Social media serve a timelier alternative to email, phone calls or face-to-face meetings. As such, platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram make government officials more accessible than ever.

5. Post Regularly: While a crisis may interrupt regularly scheduled programming, in times of relative normalcy you should make every effort to consistently share content and engage with the public. Sharing posts that might make people smile could help hold attention. If you can be funny without being offensive or crass, you may hit the Twitter jackpot.

6. Stay Secure: Simple measures can safeguard government organisations against security breaches. A social media management platform, for example, is a great tool for managing all your social media accounts and activity across multiple teams or people. Messages should be reviewed and approved in the same way activities and interactions should be logged. There must be secure login access as well as post review and approval setups.

7. Comply with Regulations: Remaining compliant with privacy requirements is critical for any government body. For large organisations with multiple social media practitioners, establishing best practices for social media use can help ensure the collective compliance of all users. Guidelines about acceptable and forbidden content, data handling, citizen engagement, and even tone are a few best practice examples to implement to keep social media teams compliant.

9.0 HARNESSING GOVERNMENT SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT TO ENHANCE EFFECTIVENESS

Government agencies and officials represent a population that is regularly engaged with social media users at large. Engaging citizens is not just an expectation for government accents; it is a civic duty. Comparing social media and government to brands or businesses might seem awkward, but the comparison is worth making. However, while the government's social presence might not be tied to selling a product or service, the big-picture goals are prominent.

- Establishing a sense of trust with the community.
- Responding to comments and questions from your followers.
- Keeping followers informed and up-to-date.

The beauty of social media and government is that the community and constituency are already there. Therefore, the job of the social media manager is to publish content that attracts attention from the followers while likewise encouraging engagement. It would therefore be appropriate to create contents that would enable the government to harvest the gains of social media as imperatives of service delivery in governance. Thus, what sorts of content should we publish in this regard?

1. Community News and Updates: This is the biggest and most obvious role of government social media accounts. The accounts should serve as a source of community news updates including events, projects, scholarships, upcoming policy changes and so on. Therefore, news should be a cornerstone of the content strategy as a government account. The effort of the government in real-time crisis management such as updates and response to COVID-19 was quite commendable. Social media should provide people with local news, firsthand. In addition, celebrating milestones, success stories and other

2. Emphasise Visual Content: Visual content in the form of videos, infographics, follower photos and memes are among the most shared across social media. There is a Chinese adage that says: “When I hear, I forget; when I see, I remember.” Not only are visuals easier for followers to understand at a glance, but visual content also makes your content more accessible to those with disabilities. The ability to manipulate interesting images and videos about events, projects and landmarks would keep the citizens engaged in such a way that, through comments, the government could assess the extent to which the people appreciate or criticise government actions.

3. Conversational Tone with Community: There is no need to be totally official (what we call “suit and tie” engagement) in relation to voice and tone on social media. Humorous captions, candid conversations and playful comments are all common among government accounts today. The social media community does not like stuffy, boring updates all the time. Interactions with followers should be treated as an opportunity to make an impression. However, this does not presuppose making light of a serious situation. Government accounts are oftentimes responsible for balancing both “just-for-fun” posts and consequential content. But the most important thing is to always sound interesting

4. Community and Event-Specific Hashtags: This is particularly helpful for government accounts with massive followers. Attaching hashtags to the messages not only makes them more visible in search but also ensures timely responses are easier to spot when somebody uses your tag. Examples: #AbiaProjects, #MadeinAba, #GovernmentHouse, #AbiaOnlinePublisher. It is also good to host Twitter Q&As and other digital events with the help of hashtags. For example: If you have #COVID19 related questions, kindly participate in a nationwide #AsktheDoctor Twitter Q&A on Friday, November 19 at Noon. Beyond featuring hashtags in the posts, government accounts can keep an eye on trending tags in their area so as to be able to provide insight (#AbiaYouths, #FreeMNK, etc)

5. Publish Content to Multiple Social Media Channels: Bear in mind that your target audience as a government account is likely fragmented between platforms. Different audiences and age groups tend to flock to different social sites. As a result, cross-posting content across multiple platforms ensures maximum reach. Nevertheless, there is a need to stick to the demands of each social medium.

10.0 THE CONCLUSION

We shall conclude by taking a look at the concepts revolving around social media vis-a-vis the communication process and phenomenon. Social media have the attributes of mass communication because they appeal to and are used by a heterogeneous population, sometimes extending beyond national boundaries. These media also have the attributes of interpersonal communication because they are used for personal and group discussions, thus bridging geographical spaces between and among people. Therefore, when citizens engage in government social media accounts, they relate to public issues in personalised ways. This scenario exemplifies the concept known as mass-personal communication.

Having this at the back of our minds, let us remember that governance has to do with actions and inactions geared towards ensuring the growth of a state, and we are all involved in it. Also, service delivery is the major concern of good governance and this is usually evidenced by the testimonies of the citizenry. One of the important functions of government agencies is to educate the public about the activities of government as well as explain the reasons behind the inability to fulfil other obligations.

It is worthy to note that education also means clarifying potential misinformation in addition to enlightening your followers. Understanding how social media move and spread rumours, government accounts serve as important sources for followers who want to cross-check information they receive from other sources. With that, governance and service delivery would have been simplified. We believe, this presentation makes sense to all of us in relation to harnessing the gains of social media in enhancing governance and service delivery in the different states in particular and the nation, Nigeria, at large.

We, therefore, recommend that agencies, that do not already have, appoint social media managers whose jobs would be to monitor and maintain government-citizen engagements that would guarantee positive criticism for development.

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