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Can Social Media Set the Agenda in Addressing Violence Against Women?

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ABSTRACT

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Media" (1972) claimed that the power of the media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on key public concerns, including gender issues, is highly significant. This implies that the media can influence what the public think about. However, the statement is, to a large extent, in reference to the traditional or mainstream media. We live in a digital age. What about the new media or social media? Can social media platforms (SMPs) such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook be used to set the agenda for change in contemporary society? Can SMPs be used to focus the attention of the public on gender issues, particularly on how to address sexual and other forms of violence against women? Can these platforms engender social change or they are just tools for leisure or entertainment? Employing descriptive and observational methods this article investigates three social media campaigns on Twitter and Facebook – *He For She, Bring Back Our Girls* and *My Dress My Choice* - with a view to assessing their capacity to set the public's agenda towards combating sexual violence against women and whether social media is an effective tool to create awareness on what is at issue. While we argue that the social media is an acknowledged change agent which is capable of mobilizing the public to stand up against incidents of sexual violence, among other gender issues, the conclusion reached is that in the three instances we examined, the momentum is often short-lived.

Keywords: SMPs; Gender issues; Agenda setting; Violence; Women; Change agent

1. INTRODUCTION

"*Let it be known once and for all that women's rights are human rights.*"

The above was the landmark statement made by the then United States of America's (USA's) First Lady, Hilary Clinton, at The Beijing Platform in 1995. Shortly after, sexual violence in war was recognized, for the first time, as a crime against humanity in the Bosnia and Herzegovina war tribunal in The Hague in 2000. Women were finally able to voice their disapproval at a system that condoned sexual and other forms of violence, especially in war; and they had the Rome Statute to back them up. Over the years, women have continued this campaign to end all kinds of violence against women. However, there is a new method being employed. It has spread from the global West and East and has now taken root in Africa. It is the social media with emphasis on the hash tags (#). At any rate, a hash tag is a type of label or metadata tag used on social network and microblogging services which makes it easier for users to find messages with a specific theme or content (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2014).

In contemporary Africa, many activists are seeking to use social media platforms (SMPs) as means to rally support from fellow activists, mobilize the populace and even pressurize those in power to act. The days of carrying placards and banners may be ebbing away to give rise to the era of the hash tag. Only recently, the #FeesMustFall was a rallying point for student protesters against increase in school fees in South African universities. This event ostensibly spiralled into a series of protests which led to the proposed drop of Afrikaans for English language as the language of instruction and teaching at Stellenbosch University after the wake of a viral video about the challenges and racism faced by black students in the institution.

Indeed, if the former USA's First Lady's statement had been made today, it would have swiftly become a full blown social media campaign complete with its own hash tag - #womenrightsarehumanrights. It is in the advent of such pacey circumstances that this article, therefore, hopes to assess the social media's ability to set the public agenda towards combating sexual violence and whether it is an effective tool to create awareness on the same issue, using social media campaigns on Twitter and Facebook – *He For She, Bring Back Our Girls*, *My Dress My Choice* as templates of discussion and analysis.

2. METHODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This is a descriptive study. The researchers observed various social media outlets and their role in setting the agenda towards combating sexual and other forms of violence against women. Observational analysis was the means by which the researchers collected the data for the study. Selected Twitter Accounts and Facebook pages along with websites and blogs were analysed. The accounts selected revolved around three campaigns that started in 2014 and are still ongoing. These campaigns revolve around equality for women and bringing an end to violence against women. They include the global *He For She* campaign launched by UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, Emma Thompson, the *Bring Back Our Girls* campaign in Nigeria and the *My Dress My Choice* campaign in Kenya.

The study is based on the agenda-setting theory of the media. This theory was coined by communication researchers - Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972. The theory was developed to explain the way in which the mass media can influence and even affect the perceptions and opinions of the public. It was based on a report of a study of the 1968 Presidential Campaign in the United States of America (USA). McCombs and Shaw compared voters' perceptions of key issues to the content published and broadcasted by the mass media. They found a correlation between the voters' view of pertinent issues and the mass media's focus on those particular issues. In other words, agenda-setting theory describes the "ability (of the news media) to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972). The theory was a landmark at the time of its coinage. However, it only applied to traditional or mainstream media such as newspapers, television broadcasts, radio broadcasts and magazines. Furthermore, recent changes in media orientation, including interactive media, trans-media and digital media have meant that there is need to investigate the role of new media forms such as social media in transforming and communicating development and social change in a fast-paced world.

At any rate, Eugene Shaw (1979) argues that although the media, whether traditional or new, may not always be persuasive, it is pervasive. One cannot escape it. It permeates every corner of one's life. This is a notion that is supported by Cohen (in McCombs and Shaw, 1972). Eugene Shaw contends that "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about." Although the media tells the public what to think about, the public decides what to think and form their own opinions based on other factors such as their religions, moral beliefs and customs. Even though it is only what the public thinks about that can be influenced, that is a powerful enough influence. After all, is it not thought that leads to conviction that in turn spurs action?

3. THE SOCIAL MEDIA

We live in a digital age. The concept of agenda setting only in relation to traditional media needs to be broadened and interrogated. The social media should not be disqualified as a tool for agenda setting just because it does not fit in to the category of media as prescribed by McCombs and Shaw. In today's digital age where nearly everyone is online, we can see the traditional media and social media crisscrossing. Even mainstream media such as television broadcasting stations and newspapers have websites where the public can read news and other stories online. Before, we proceed further, it is necessary to define what the social media is. According to Michael Dewing (2012), the term 'social media' refers to the wide range of Internet based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchanges, contribute user-created content, or join online communities. Examples of these internet based services include: Blogs, social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, Flickr, Waplog, RSS, My Space, Skype, 2go, What's app, Hi five, among others (Okhakhu and Omoera, 2010; Ehiemua and Omoera, 2015).

Michelle Chmielewski in Heidi Cohen (2011) offers that "social media is not about what each one of us does or says, but about what we do and say together, worldwide, to communicate in all directions at any time, by any possible (digital) means." By the definition, one may infer that the social media is the perfect tool to use to spread an agenda due to its

wide reach of audience. The foregoing reinforces the premise for our discussion. If the social media is "not about what one person says but what we say together", it provides a framework to investigate how SMPs are being used to pass these messages to affect change. That is the aim of setting the agenda after all – to influence what people think about, get them talking about it and have them act on their thoughts.

Although not given much thought in early years, the social media gained tremendous respect in the 'Arab Spring' that occurred towards the end of 2010. The Arab Spring refers to the Arab revolution that swept across several Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa such as Yemen, Syria, Tunisia and Libya. The revolution was prompted by a Tunisian trader – Mohammed Bouaziz - who set himself ablaze in protest to the economic hardships in the country and the general oppression of the citizens by the regime in place. SMPs such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were used to organize demonstrations and invite people to join the protest. These SMPs were also used to share the plight of these countries to the international community. The governments of some of these countries attempted to silence their voices by blocking some social media sites being used. When this happened in Egypt, Tunisians offered to host their sites and pages in solidarity. The public – fed up of oppressive conditions – were an easy target for agenda-setting by the social media. They just needed their thoughts directed to the injustices they suffer daily. They needed a trigger. Bouaziz was that trigger. An activist in Cairo rightly put it, "We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate and YouTube to tell the world" (Howard, 2011).

4. SOCIAL MEDIA: SETTING THE AGENDA IN ADDRESSING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

#heforshe

On September 20, 2014, the newly appointed UN Women Goodwill Ambassador, Emma Watson, launched a global feminist campaign – *He For She.* The goal of this campaign is to promote gender equality and campaign against any form of sexual violence against women. This is to be achieved by involving men and encouraging them to stand against chauvinism and support the women's rights movement. The *He For She* website states that the campaign aims to "put men at the centre of activism and dialogue to end persistent inequalities faced by women and girls around the world".

Furthermore, they aimed to recruit 100,000 men to fight for gender equality in the span of twelve months. The campaign nearly reached its goal in record time. The *He For She* campaign had acquired approximately 85,000 signatures - from men in support of it from across the globe - within 48 hours of its launch. Before its official launch, Emma Watson sent a message on Twitter on the 18th of August, advocating for gender equality and signed it with the hash tag *#heforshe*. Her account indicates that her tweet was *retweeted* over 27,000 times and was *favourited* – approved of - over 33,000 times.

The number of *retweets* and *favourites* that the tweet got is an indication of the public finding the message relevant. The stage is set for the public to have their thoughts inclined to this campaign. According to analytics firm, Topsy, the *#heforshe* hash tag was *retweeted* over 160,000 times within the first month of the campaign's launch.

#bringbackourgirls

On Tuesday 15th April 2014, 276 school girls were abducted from their dormitory at the Chibok Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria, by the extremist Islamic militant group, Boko Haram. Weeks after the kidnapping of these schoolgirls, the story had little or no visibility in the global scene. It was an atrocious act on innocent school girls, how come the story had not made world news? People wondered. This rapidly changed, however when the #bringbackourgirls campaign took the world by storm. The campaign took the slogan from a speech given by Oby Ezekweseli, the Vice President of the World Bank for Africa. It was touch and go from there. The campaign spread like wild fire across the globe.

SMPs such Facebook and Twitter were flooded with celebrities and world leaders holding up posters with the hash tag. Twitter was bursting with photos of protesters all around the world bearing banners with the hash tag. Suddenly, the world was paying attention and even vowed to support the Nigeria in its efforts at retrieving the abducted girls. The USA pledged to send a team, including military personnel, intelligence and hostage negotiators to help. Britain sent advisers and a Royal Air Force (RAF) surveillance aircraft to aid in the search. Analytics firm, Topsy, reports that within the first month of the kidnapping, the hash tag *#bringbackourgirls,* had been mentioned more than one million times all around the world. The world was definitely poised to think about the plight of the kidnapped girls. Protests were held around the globe to show solidarity to the cause. Even influential people such as the United States of America's first lady, Michelle Obama, and Nobel Laureate Malala joined the bandwagon and posted pictures of themselves with posters bearing the hash tag.

The world was suddenly urging the Nigerian government to act; to 'bring back our girls.' One may however, speculate on the exact expectation of the #bringbackourgirls campaign. The movement aims to see the abducted girls returned but who and how is this to be facilitated? The Boko Haram terrorist group demands the release of its captured militants/insurgents in exchange for the girls. At other times we understand that they (the insurgents) demanded for huge sums of money or the girls would be married to men who can pay against the girls' will. More recently, news made the rounds that many of the girls have been impregnated having been used as 'sex objects' with reckless abandon by male members of deadly group. However, can one really trust their word? Even if one could, is the government really in a position to release the hundreds of captured militants or give huge sums of money out? To what end? That move would only see their enemy growing stronger. Or perhaps the expectation is for the Nigerian national army to venture a rescue mission and risk the lives of the captive girls? That is if they can find the hideout in the first place. Or perhaps the campaign is directed at the Boko Haram; sending a compassionate plea for Boko Haram leader Mohammed Shekau to find the good in his heart and release the girls of his own free will; hardly a logical conclusion.

Three months after the abduction, Shekau posted a chilling video on YouTube where he disparagingly retorts that if the Nigerian government wants him to #bringbackourgirls, then it should 'bring back our army!' With such a conundrum, one may wonder how else the social media campaign can be of use. It should be recalled that as distressing as the incident is, it is not the first occurrence on the continent of Africa.

The Lord Resistance Army in Uganda abducted 139 school girls back in 1996. It just did not receive as much international attention as #bringbackourgirls (Taylor, 2014).

Less than a year after the abduction, the #bringbackourgirls campaign slipped out of the globe's focus. In spite of the massive international support it had accrued at the time, it was soon forgotten. The hash tag twitter campaign that went viral almost overnight is no longer centre stage in global news. As per the nature of the news cycle, it was overtaken by other atrocious events such as the infamous ISIS – Islamic State militia group – which is terrorizing citizens, especially women and children in Syria and Iraq (Ogene, 2014), and more recently the European cities of Paris and Brussels. In spite of the global silence, in Nigeria, the epicentre of the campaign lives on. The movement has promised that the girls will never be forgotten. To date, over two years later, the Bring Back Our Girls movement is still holding protests. On the 1st anniversary of the abduction, 14 April 2015, the Empire State Building in New York lit up in purple and red in honour of the abducted school girls (Nagarajan, 2015). The movement further called for a week of action to commemorate the anniversary.

This campaign has also given the women in Nigeria a platform to lobby for their human rights and express their struggles against sexual and other forms of violence on an international scale. Where their voices were unheard before, now they had a 'microphone' and the world is listening. For instance, the case of Ese Rita Oruru, a 13 year-old girl who was allegedly abducted on August 12, 2015 by one Yinusa, an Hausa man in Bayelsa who took her to Kano and forcefully married her there without the consent of her parents (Danielle Ogbeche, 2016), came to dominate public discourse in Nigeria owing to the ingenious deployment of SMPs by civil society groups. Apart from the untold sexual molestations she might have gone through, she had been impregnated by the abductor by the time the Kano State government and the Federal Government of Nigeria waded into the matter after much pressure from civil society groups from within and outside the country.

The case of Ese Oruru like the Chibok girls' abduction prompted many people around the globe to show solidarity by organizing marches and protests in their own home countries. The relentless global attention forced the Nigerian government to develop guidelines on gender based violence (GBV) and started the process of putting up legislation against sexual violence against women and girls. The hash tag was extremely helpful in focusing the public's thoughts on the atrocities faced by women in the country. Furthermore, it was instrumental in marshalling the country in dialogues and protests. It gave the people a voice, one that might never be silenced again.

#mydressmychoice

The *'My Dress, My Choice'* campaign that flooded the Kenyan social media scene in November 2014, was in response to the stripping of women who were accused of dressing inappropriately. The incidents occurred in broad daylight in Nairobi and Mombasa.

The particular incident that sparked the national outrage was that of a woman who was stripped at a Nairobi bus station. The victim, a female vendor working near the busy bus stop had gone to collect payment for some boiled eggs that she had sold to a regular customer earlier on in the day. The customer had not yet paid. She went to collect her dues. However, when she approached the customer, he called her a 'whore' and threatened to deal with her. Unperturbed, she persisted for her dues. It was at that point that the customer violently attacked the female vendor and started to shred her clothes. Several men in the area joined in

the exercise and assaulted her to the point that she lost consciousness. The whole event was filmed on a phone and uploaded on SMP – YouTube and within minutes it went viral.

This was only the beginning. Soon after, a school girl was harassed and nearly stripped in a public service vehicle by three men. One of the men happened to be a police officer. This attack was also filmed on phone and went viral having been uploaded on SMPs of Facebook and Twitter. It led to the apprehension of the perpetrators; citizen journalism at its finest (Nyabola, 2015).

On November 17, 2014, irate women activists took to the streets of Nairobi with banners and marched in protest. The protest saw women and men – in support of the cause – marching down Nairobi's busy streets bearing banners with their hash tag. It conglomerated in Uhuru Park. In fact, SMPs such as Twitter and Facebook were abuzz with the latest on the campaign. Those supporting the cause quickly changed their Facebook or Twitter profile pictures to a purple ribbon to mirror the logo for the *#mydressmychoice* campaign.

The Twitter hash tag was the platform to rally people together to show their support for the victims and to also display their frustration at the continued violence perpetrated on women. The hash tag was a battle cry. It was a mobilizing agent that brought women and men together against this injustice. The stripping of women deemed indecently dressed has happened before; they just went unreported. This campaign however has brought the degrading practice to the forefront where it can be confronted by all (Cuddihy, 2014).

Preliminary Findings

The social media in these campaigns, aside from being used as a tool for agenda-setting served other purposes which are hereby highlighted:

Call to action – it was a slogan, the band cry that stirred people to flood streets across the globe in protest. It spurred the public to act.

Create awareness – the campaigns alerted the world about the situation on the ground. They were instrumental in giving updated information on any progress.

Fortify activists groups – as highlighted, the *He For She* campaign has strengthened the global feminist agenda while the *Bring Back Our Girls c*ampaign has given women in Nigeria a voice to speak out against the violence they face in their daily lives.

Raise the frustrated plight of the public – the *Bring Back Our Girls* and *My Dress My Choice* campaigns provided avenues for the general public to voice their exasperation of the atrocities that seem to be never ending. If the public had a voice that was audible to the government and the world, it took the opportunity to use it to the maximum.

Rally international support – the campaigns attracted international support with foreign governments pledging support in the *Bring Back Our Girls* campaign. Notable international figures came on board which propelled the cause to higher heights and brought it to the foreground of global debate.

We can also deduce that these social media campaigns were or are mainly reactive rather than proactive. Important, too, is the fact that many of the social media campaigns often

lose momentum after a period of time and are easily forgotten. Preliminarily, our investigation reveals that the activities or campaigns that are carried out on SMPs are sometimes iffy. Furthermore, the social media is not necessarily accessible to all, particularly in developing societies such as Nigeria and Kenya, where many of the people reside in the rural areas. Thus, traditional or mainstream media are still heavily relied upon for information by a greater number of the populace in these countries. Lastly, it is sometimes unclear to whom the campaign is being addressed as it often appears that everyone is talking and no one is actually talking.

5. CONCLUSION

It has been noted in this study that the public cannot be told what to think; only told what to think about. This is the agenda setting function that the media performs. We can infer from the discussion that the social media did in fact manage to tell the public what to think about if the response to the various campaigns is anything to go by. The public's thoughts were directed to the various instances of violence against women and this, in turn, prompted some action. One might deduce that this is indeed the end goal of agenda setting – to get the public to act in a certain way having been inclined to think about a particular issue. In spite of all these positives, in the long run, does it really make a difference? Chandler (2015) notes that digital activism is effective but only for a spell. In other words, social media campaigns such as the ones that have been investigated in this study can effectively set the agenda for the public but they are more or less short-lived. They can put the message(s) in the brain and cause action but the generated actions are not really tangible or long-lasting.

Recommendations

Instead of trying to stifle the social media (as we have observed in the case of the Nigerian Senate which tried to asphyxiate social media operations through unpopular legislation, which was in any case resisted by the Nigerian people), governments – especially in Nigeria, Kenya and other parts of Africa - should use it as a tool to interact with its citizens and address serious issues, including sexual violence against women, that they might raise or be contending with. Activists and social campaigners should involve people at grassroots levels in order to ensure sustainability of campaigns. These campaigns should not be reactive but proactive. Some policy frameworks should be emplaced in Nigeria, Kenyan and other developing countries in Africa to make social media users and other 'netizens' more professional, responsible and patriotic in their activities in the net. Such an effort is capable of making the use of SMPs a critical component of the strategic communication efforts of government at different levels towards effecting behavioural changes in society as well as managing such changes for sustainable development.

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