Bridging the Knowledge Gap on Migration and Inclusiveness through Web-Based Media: Implications for Theorising Communication

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Abstract
The implications of the emergence of the new media, of which the social media are a part, will no doubt engage the attention of scholars for quite some time. Unarguably, the social media are redefining the communication landscape in amazing ways. For instance, the old, young and children are migrating from the conventional media to become active participants in the emerging new world of interactive media. With migration, the issue of exclusion is gradually paling into insignificance as people who were cut off from accessing the mainstream media owing to a myriad of barriers have become active information sources and consumers in the new media terrain. This development raises a fundamental question on theorising an aspect of communication. Is the introduction of social media going to bridge the information gap between the privileged and underprivileged in society in contrast to the tenet of the Knowledge Gaps theory? Using an inductive analytical approach, this paper seeks to establish that the advent and wide spread use of the social media may have ignited a process of closing up the information gap between the privileged and underprivileged. To that extent, the tenet of the said theory needs to be re-examined in the light of current realities. However, this paper opens a window to empirical test of the argument presented here as a logical way of proving or disproving theories.

Introduction

There seems to be a consensus among scholars that in empirical investigation of any phenomenon, propounding a theory does not close the chapter in the fact-finding endeavour. Simply put, theory is not the final word in scientific research. Theory possesses one characteristic that makes this possible: dynamism. A theory must be flexible right from ideation to accommodate emerging developments related to what it is out to establish as scientific truth. This, at times, leads to opening up new prisms of examining the subject of interest which may eventually culminate in adjusting the existing boundaries of what has been previously agreed on as the limits of knowledge in the area of study. In this way, as more insight is gained into the phenomenon of inquiry, new territories are mapped out which could question the validity of existing knowledge or sometimes affirm it. Like the philosophers would say, a thesis is challenged by an anti-thesis which leads to a synthesis which is again challenged by a new thesis. In this way, the stream of thought is kept in motion through which knowledge is birthed.

There have been cases in human history when theories that were previously considered sacrosanct were upturned by new discoveries especially in the natural sciences. For example, the geocentric theory of the Sun moving round the Earth has been confined to the garbage of history. Same goes for the supposed indivisibility of the atom, the misconstrued rectangular shape of the Earth and causes of diseases like Malaria which was erroneously attributed to bad air. In the Social Sciences, the Malthusian economic theory suffered a shipwreck in the hands of the industrial revolution. Suffice it to say that the field of communication studies is not immune to intellectual mutations. Overtime, technology has been a defining factor in the transformations that have occurred to the nature and processes of human communication. Mbachu (2003) in Alemoh (2011, p.18) notes that "Mass communication has always required technology to broaden its reach and expand its influence. From the primitive to the modern societies, the story of mass communication has been that of changes wrought by improvements in technology".

Fiddler (1997) in Nwammuo (2011) has rightly described this phenomenon as *mediamorphosis* which Biagi (2003) also cited in Nwammuo (2011) believes is a

template to "examine all forms of communication media as members of an interdependent system, and to note the similarities and relationships that exist among past, present and emerging forms". Nwammuo (2011) further reports that Fidler (1997) regards *mediamorphosis* as "a unified way of thinking about the technological evolution of communication media" adding that the concept implies "the transformation of communication media, usually brought about by the complex interplay of perceived needs, competitive and political pressures, and social and technological innovations".

Wilson (2015, p.26) in attesting to the validity of mediamorphosis as a concept observes that "…there had grown a realisation that each media system operating individually does not have the capacity to address most of our communication needs. There was therefore a need for a media-mix organised around indigenous and modern systems". Roa (2006) in a review of Roger Fiddler's book, *Mediamorphosis: Understanding New Media,* points out that the author identified six principles of mediamorphosis as follows: "Coexistence and co-evolution of media forms, gradual metamorphosis of new media forms from old ones, propagation of dominant traits in media forms, survival of media forms and enterprises in a changing environment, merits and needs for adopting new media, and delays from proof of concepts to widespread adoption of new media".

It is self-evident that technology has so much redefined mass communication to the point of enmeshing scholars in a mental quandary on how best to qualify the mass communication experience. Scholars like Chaffee and Metzger (2001, pp.365-379) have even questioned whether the end of mass communication has come. This assertion is collaborated by Byrant & Thompson (2002, pp.369-370) that "Certainly the prototypical scenario for typical media use under the micro-multimedia environment is miles removed from what our intellectual ancestors meant by Mass Communication". Wilson (2015, p.10) also affirms that "Indeed, because of the nature of the communication enterprise, it is even becoming old-fashioned to refer to communication programmes as simply mass communication. There is a growing demassification of the communication programme." All these postulations point to the changes that are sweeping across the discipline and practice of communication especially in recent times.

There is no gainsaying the fact that as the communication process undergoes changes, the theories in the field are also brought under scrutiny as to their validity in the face of contemporary realities. In the light of the foregoing assertion, this paper argues that the advent of the social media has opened up new frontiers through which some existing theories of mass communication could be critically re-examined. The

discourse focuses on the Knowledge Gaps theory which gained popularity in the 1970s. The point of scholarly attraction in this case is in the basic assumption of the theory that as media output grows in a given society, so will the knowledge gaps between the privileged and underprivileged social groups (Folarin, 1998 in Asemah, 2011). It is indisputable that the advent of the social media has contributed to the growth of media output in the contemporary world. By implication, the gulf between the rich and the poor in terms of exposure to information would continue to widen as more media technologies are introduced.

This paper, therefore, adopts the inductive method to question the validity of this postulate with regards to the nature and uses of the social media in the modern society. The new media have made it easy for media users to migrate from dependence on conventional media to alternative sources of information. Unlike the 'old' or conventional media which were characteristically linear model pattern of communication, the new media are interactive and have the capacity of making a user both content generator and consumer simultaneously. Those that were previously alienated from the mainstream media have found a voice to express their feelings in the new media landscape. In place of alienation, the new media offer inclusiveness leading to a boost in the quest to attain media democratisation.

When the overall impact of the social media on people's behaviour is carefully examined, one would discover a tendency towards a paradigm shift in theorising at least some aspects of the communication process. Could it be safely hypothesised that the ubiquity of the social media and mass adoption of their use actually accentuate the knowledge gaps between the information-rich and information-poor in contemporary times? Could it be that there is a tendency for the modern society to attain the 'ceiling point' level emphasized in the knowledge Gaps theory in which case the information malnourished will catch up with the information 'sated' privileged group? In essence, this paper seeks to redirect attention on the need for an empirical investigation of the tenets of the knowledge Gaps theory in the light of the challenges posed by the emergence of the social media on the current communication terrain. Severin & Tankard (2001, p.372) have rightly raised a poser

> What is the task for communication researchers and theorists with regard to the rapid changes in communication technology? Researchers should be focusing on the human side of new communication developments…one route to answering these kinds of questions is to apply existing theories of communication to the new forms of communication. Another route is to articulate the key questions

> regarding the new media and conduct research and
> develop new theories to answer those questions.

This exploratory study is, therefore, meant to be a curtain raiser in an attempt at mapping the territory of an existing communication theory.

Review of Concepts

New Media

The following quotation attributed to Horace Greely in the later part of the 19th century summarises the overriding impact of the new media technologies in the history of humanity. As documented by Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.365), "Among the marvellous accomplishments of human study and genius, nothing, all facts considered, can well be regarded as more important than man's triumph over space and time in the matter of the intercommunication of widely separated individuals and nations". This axiomatic statement was said to have been made by Horace Greely and others in 1872 in a book chapter titled "The American Magnetic Telegraph". As at the time the above assertion was made, much of the present day mouth-gaping technological innovations in the media were yet to unfold. Equally stunning was the prognosis of Marshal McLuhan in 1964 that the world would sometime become a global village through the instrumentality of technology. Today, these scholars have been vindicated.

The great turn around in human communication got a boost with the emergence of the new media which are products of digital communication. According to Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.368), "The move to digital communication has resulted in new media environments that are often interactive in nature and allow multiple functions and tasks to be performed on a single piece of equipment such as a home computer or a television". In actual fact, the new media environments are as stimulating as they are challenging to the society. Also, the new media have been accorded a myriad of definitions depending on the scholarly orientation and disposition of the examiner. A sample of such elucidations is worth considering here.

Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.380) say that "New media are characterised by specialised nature, decentralised products and interactive formats. The key to understanding the nature of digital technology can be found in three 'C' words: compression, conversion, and convergence". Oleh (2015, p.193) says that "Whatever their definition, these relatively new media channels largely provide platforms where people from different backgrounds, geographical locations become members of a virtual community, interact by exchanging ideas, information or data through web based cyber technology".

On how much impact social media as an arm of the new media are making on humanity, Giugno (2017) opine that

> There are now more than 3 billion active social media users around the world. A staggering number, especially when you consider the Earth's population is 7.5 billion. But it should be no surprise that almost half of the world's population is on social (sic). Living in the hyper-connected age privileges us to speak to anyone in the world instantly, witness first-hand how people in other cultures live and, due to the sheer amount of data and attention social networks receive on a daily basis, address important societal and professional problems.

The above assertion is a testimonial to the level of adoption and use of social media worldwide. The case of Nigeria is not different because as the Minister of Communications in Nigeria as at the time of writing, Mr. Adebayo Shittu notes in a news report by Amaefule Everest (*Punch Newspaper* online, Nov. 17, 2017), "About 75 per cent of Nigeria's population that use the Internet are on the social media".

Another area of concern in this discourse is that the new media are remarkably different from their progenitors –the conventional media –in the sense that the former's *modus operandi* is strictly on a controlled basis both on the part of the sender and receiver. For instance, as Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.369) attest

> The decade of the 1990s has yielded a generation of addressable users of *micro-multimedia.* By 'addressable' we mean that media messages are no longer being sent 'to whom it may concern'. Indeed, media messages may be selected and 'downloaded' by parties whose names, addresses, identification numbers and demographic and marketing profiles are a part of the message distributor's database.

What this assertion underscores is that there is a greater control of the communication process at the moment with the new media unlike in the conventional media of mass communication which was characteristically uni-directional. One distinguishing parameter of the new media is that they are audience specific. What this means is that a source through the new media could address a specific message to a specific (specialized) audience which could be a virtual community of like minds. Severin & Tankard (2001, p.369) note that "Virtual communities are communities that exist in the world of electronic communication rather than in the physical world…chat rooms, e-mail mailing lists, and electronic discussion groups are more recent examples of places where communities can be formed online". This also

creates a sense of belonging to every participant on social media in choosing where and who to identify with in the cyberspace.

All of these interactions are done in cyberspace which is described by Turkle (1995) in Severin & Tankard (2001, p.368) as "an inclusive term for the World Wide Web, the Internet, electronic mailing lists, discussion groups and forums, chat rooms, interactive multiplayer games, and even e-mail". In a more metaphoric sense, Gibson (1995) in Alemoh (2011, p.1) has described Cyberspace as "…where a long distance phone call takes place. Cyberspace is where the bank keeps your money; where your medical records are stored. All of this stuff is out there somewhere. There is really no point in thinking about its geographical location. Information is extra-geographical". It is interesting to state here that the 'extra-geographical' shape of modern communication orchestrated through the new media has made information readily available to all, thereby relegating to the background the issues of alienation, inequality, exclusion and segregation.

Migration

Migration is a term that has often been associated with movement of people or animals from one place to another. When people are subjected to certain intolerable conditions, they would likely migrate to other places that offer better opportunities. Equally, when there is an alternative that offers much more benefits than what is available, this may also cause people to migrate, in this case, making a change or a shift of patronage. Taking this analogy to the digital world, migration, in a layman's interpretation, could involve a change in media use by people at one time or the other.

A study conducted by Aksakal & Schmidt-Verkerk (2016) indicates that migration is a conceptualised expression of mobility which is a distinct way to focus on economic, social and political relationships. Mobility is categorised into two dimensions; spatial and social mobility. Spatial mobility/migration is a very broad category of human movement including many different forms of mobility among which are: corporeal travel of people, the physical movement of objects, the imaginative travel through print and visual media, virtual travel and communicative travel via messages, phones etc. Mobility studies investigate, among other things, how mobility is embodied, practised, perceived and imagined. Aksakal & Schmidt-Verkerk (2016) discuss the mobility paradigm, emphasise the primacy of mobility in the current world and investigate ways in which mobility reconfigures social life, in relation to fundamental change and progress in society. From a post–disciplinary viewpoint, the mobility turn emphasises "how all social entities from a single household to large-scale corporation presuppose many different forms of actual and potential movement".

Migration has always been a dominant characteristic of media audience because as new media technologies debut, audience loyalty swiftly switches to the emerging media technology even though it does not mean a total abandoning of the previous media. Media history shows that the invention of radio, as fascinating as it was, could not phase out the newspaper neither was television able to do same to radio. At the moment, in spite of the much touted innovations occasioned by the birthing of the internet, the conventional media still abound. This is why Wilson (2015, p.31) says that no new media have been able to successfully replace older ones. Giving an example of migration in recent media history, Betiang (2016, p.120) avers that "In the area of books, new media has (sic) occasioned digital migration from the hardcopy to e-formats; which has in its own way increased readers' liberation through increased accessibility, affordability, motility and wider distribution…"

Migration has indeed taken place in different ramifications especially with the introduction of the new media. When the social media debuted, they were thought to be technologies predominantly identified with youths but as it is today, the young and old struggle for available spaces online to interact with their contacts. Equally, the print media industry has migrated to the online platform just as the broadcast media have followed suit, thereby making the Internet a hybridised medium. Business organisations have taken to the social media as avenues of establishing more personal relationships with their customers.

Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness indicates a state of encompassing in terms of what is being considered. The new media have the unique quality of inclusiveness in the sense that unlike the conventional media which clearly alienate the underprivileged from the 'public sphere' by being too elitist, expensive to access, remote from the audience and manipulated by overbearing ownership influence, among other factors, the social media tend to have effectively broken down the gargantuan barrier by being user-friendly, affordable, available and virtually free from control. The concept of inclusiveness in the digital revolution otherwise known as e-inclusion (Verdegem 2011, p.30) sweeping across the world has been an issue of concern even to policy makers.

Interrogating the e-inclusion phenomenon, Verdegem (2011, p.31) queries, "But what should be understood under e-inclusion? To a certain extent, e-inclusion can be seen as policy intervention in order to reduce digital inequalities and to foster participation of all citizens to (sic) the information society". In essence, this suggests creating an enabling environment by governments, international bodies and agencies

for everyone to participate in the global transformation of human communication. As noted by Verdegem (2011, p.31), "…beyond access to ICT tools and services, beyond even digital literacy, a definition of e-inclusion should focus on people's empowerment and participation in the knowledge society and economy". It could be said based on the foregoing assertions that inclusiveness is not just about having a space in the virtual world but being able to translate that experience to benefits of empowerment on the part of the participant.

At the moment, newspapers have gone online making it possible for everyone irrespective of status to access them. Before now, newspaper reading was the exclusive preserve of the elite but today, anyone with a smart phone has access to a wide range of newspapers cutting across local, national and international publications. This is unlike in the time past when the reader was restricted to the copy of the newspaper he is able to afford. Another interesting dimension to the unfolding scenario is that online newspaper readers do not just read the stories but forward those that interest them to their contacts. By this, the information chain is widened and elongated. Before long, such stories become viral. News dissemination has invariably entered into the era of virtual marketing. This is evidence of the inclusiveness offered by the social media that have successfully disarmed the alienation prowess of the conventional media.

Social media help people to have a sense of belonging by building a network of relationships the world over. For instance, people of like minds aggregate their experiences on social media and proffer solutions to their challenges from a pool of suggestions. In relation to the impact of the social media in the work environment, Giugno (2017) notes that

> From Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn to Snapchat, Whatsapp, Reddit and Slack, social platforms can be co-opted to open up direct communication channels between demographics: an Afro-Caribbean candidate can speak freely, openly and without oversight to a member of the employer's internal network of Afro-Caribbean employees; a candidate with disability can ask an employee with disability about workplace accessibility; a headhunted female executive can message a present female executive to discuss boardroom culture.

Media Democratisation

Media democratisation is a concept that emanated from the tenet of the Democratic-Participant Media theory. The theory concerns itself with how the media space could

be widened to make it more participatory. In other words, the media space or 'public sphere' could be maximised by not being left in the hands of professionals, and not elitist in nature. The theory also advocates small scale media organisation in preference to large, commercialised media, and bringing media closer to the people. In a nutshell, Democratic-Participant Media theory emphasises media decentralisation in place of monopoly, horizontal in place of vertical or top-down communication and participation by all in place of restriction. This, obviously, points to inclusiveness as discussed earlier in this paper.

Media democratisation, therefore, has to do with creating a platform through which all could have access to the media. There is no doubt that the advent of the social media and the Internet has made this mass participation possible. Evans, Twomey & Talan (2011) have rightly pointed out that "With equal access and the free flow of information, the Internet supports a true democracy unlike any other medium before it". Democracy here referred to is media related in the sense that it encapsulates the widening of the public sphere, a concept popularised by Jurgen Habermas. The plank upon which issues of migration and inclusiveness are resting today is the concept of media democratisation.

In other words, the 'public sphere' is no longer the preserve of a privileged few as it were. Anyone could access information and disseminate same at will and at an affordable cost. At present, it is difficult to distinguish media content producers from consumers because both parties have become trans-receivers. With media democratisation, a participant could be consuming and generating media content simultaneously for distribution to others. This is why Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.369) say that "What we formerly referred to as an 'audience' must now be termed 'users'". The nomenclatural transformation is significant because it has redefined the roles of participants in the communication process. Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.369) have further posited that "The new media enable users to become more active in the communication process and to be more selective with regard to the messages they receive. They are active agents rather than passive receivers of information". Adebayo Shittu, Minister of Communications in Nigeria (as at the time of writing) is quoted in a news report in the *Punch* newspaper (2017) cited earlier as saying

> In an era when the social media have become very strong platforms for information dissemination and public discourse, it is imperative for the government and the key players in the private sector to pay extra attention to feedback from and utilise these new media to provide platforms for government-citizen and business-public engagement in an online, real-time and interactive manner.

Severin & Tankard (2001, p.367) have described the transformation in communication more vividly:

> …the Internet is changing communication in some fundamental ways. Traditional mass media have primarily offered a one-to-many model of communication. The World Wide Web provides additional models: many-to-one (email to a central address, numerous users interacting with a website) and many-to-many (email, mailing lists, news groups). The Web offers the potential for communication that is more decentralized and more democratic than that provided by the older mass media.

Knowledge Gaps Theory Revisited

This theory was initially propounded by the trio of Tichener, Donohue and Olien at the University of Minnesota in the 1970s (Asemah, 2011, p.183). According to Asemah, the theory "assumes that the spread of information in a society can bring about an increase in gap between people of lower and higher socio-economic status". In other words, there is a difference in the level of exposure to information between the privileged and the underprivileged in society. The theory attributes this difference to media technology which the privileged have easy access to than the underprivileged. This is why Folarin (1998 supported by Asemah, 2011) opines that the basic assumption of the Knowledge Gaps theory is that "as media output grows in a given society, so will the knowledge gaps between privileged and underprivileged social groups". This presupposes that "those at the higher socio-economic levels acquire information much faster and much more easily than those at the lower levels" because "increase in media output, rather than even out differences between the information-rich and the information-poor, actually accentuates those differences". Folarin further says that the Knowledge Gaps theory seeks to answer the questions of:

i.   How knowledge is distributed in society, and
ii. How the media influence that distribution.

However, as noted by Folarin, there is a ceiling point at which the gaps may level out when the information-rich becomes 'sated' while the information-malnourished continue to search till they catch up with the former. This point is fundamental to this discourse because as the new media become commonplace and the underprivileged gain wider access and participation, everyone would eventually get 'sated' with a deluge of information flowing around. The ceiling point would have been attained.

Asemah (2011, p.184) advances five reasons as premises on which the Knowledge Gaps theory stands as follows:

i. People of higher socio-economic status have better communication skills, education, reading, comprehending and remembering information.

ii. People of higher socio-economic status can store information more easily or remember the topic from background knowledge.

iii. People of higher socio-economic status are better in selective exposure, acceptance and retention; and

iv. The nature of the mass media itself is that it is geared towards persons of higher socio-economic status.

Given the above scenario, Asemah posits that "Any attempt to use media to equalise the distribution of knowledge within a social system seems doomed not just to fail, but to increase inequalities". This claim is highly contestable because a foray into the impact of the new media on communication would rather present a different picture. It is in this respect that this paper disagrees with the position expressed by earlier theorists as stated above. This paper contends that the social media, owing to their nature and uses, have demonstrated the capability of bridging the information gap between the haves and the have-nots in society.

Need for Re-evaluating Knowledge Gaps theory

There is no better way of re-evaluating the Knowledge Gaps theory in the light of recent innovations in media technology use than to revisit its assumptions against the background of the changes such technologies have midwifed overtime. This section of the discourse re-examines these basic assumptions.

First, there is a gap between people of lower and higher socio-economic status in terms of exposure to information. This assumption would be tenable in a situation where the lower income people do not have access to media technology as it were in the pre-social media era of conventional media dominance. The issue of access as it were was not limited to the cost of media technology like a radio or television set but also revolved around getting a voice in the media. Of course, only the elites had the media at their command. Taking a look at the present scenario where the new media have become every man's companion, the perceived gap in information between people in the lower and higher socio-economic groups seems to be getting narrow. The information that is available to the rich is also within the reach of the poor alike just at the touch of the button.

Second, the difference in exposure to information is attributable to media technology which the privileged have easy access to than the underprivileged. This

assumption has also been punctured on the grounds that the new media technologies, which now make the difference, are readily available to all at affordable cost. Uji (2015) has observed that "The technology of social media is relatively cheap, and it has made it very relatively easy to access and disseminate important information". Uji further notes that "With access to internet getting cheaper, more youths are spending substantial time on the internet on a daily basis. Inevitably, they come across social media posts that relate to governance and socio-political issues, and may get involved in the discussion. This marks the beginning of their participation". Initially, when computers were launched into the market, they were very expensive; same with smart phones and other similar media gadgets. Today, the story has changed dramatically as different products jostle for space in the open market at minimal prices.

Third, as media output grows in a given society, so will the knowledge gaps between privileged and underprivileged social groups. This assumption can no longer be accepted because just as argued in the foregoing, the new media technologies are growing tremendously in the market forcing their prices to drop abysmally and by extension, making them cheaply available to users. Contrary to the assumption of the theory, the new media make information readily available to all and sundry in the modern society.

Fourth, those at the higher socio-economic levels acquire information much faster and much more easily than those at the lower levels. This, again, is no longer the case because the cost of accessing information has been so minimised for everyone to afford. For instance, in Nigeria today, some service providers offer free megabytes to their subscribers at each recharge with which to surf the internet. Sometimes, just a hundred & fifty Naira (N150) only can give one access to a large volume of data for a month, although, the data plan may vary within and between network service providers. Also, the law of competitiveness, which places the consumer in his rightful position of being a king in the market place, has made most of the service providers reduce the cost of their products to make them more attractive than those of their competitors. The point is that everyone is virtually placed at a vantage position to acquire information fast and easily, courtesy of the new media.

Fifth, increase in media output, rather than even out differences between the information-rich and the information-poor, actually accentuates those differences. This may be herculean a task to justify in the face of the reality of the new media. Given the foregoing argument, it is hard to distinguish between the information-rich and information-poor within the context of new media use, particularly the social media. The highly placed in the society, such as presidents, heads of international

organisations, can now relate personally with anyone through Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and the like. Organisations at the moment relate with their customers/clients on one-on-one basis. There seems to be no such thing again as the information-rich because information is now readily available to everyone even in the comfort of their bedrooms. Indeed, there is every reason to describe the contemporary society as one that is prone to information explosion.

Sixth, any attempt to use media to equalise the distribution of knowledge within a social system seems doomed not just to fail, but to increase inequalities. This assumption has obviously been proved wrong because the new media have not just equalised the distribution of Knowledge but has reduced inequalities to the level of insignificance. As this paper argued, participants in the social media, for instance, are not just passive consumers of information but generate it as well. Those who probably were not privileged or were simply disadvantaged to watch the news on conventional media as it were now have the same information at their fingertips through smart phones, iPods, tablets and personal computers. The conventional media are forced to embrace the new media through which their audience capacity is enlarged and sometimes, they pick news from the social media. This development has further opened up another window for rethinking the agenda-setting theory.

There is a ceiling point at which the gaps may level out when the information-rich becomes 'sated' while the information-malnourished continue to search till they catch up with the former. This assumption is already a *fait accompli* as every participant on social media would attest to being subjected to nauseating information overload. There is a deluge of information on social media at the moment to make every user (whether rich or poor) 'sated'; information comes in volumes more than what the user can easily process and assimilate. Everyone is virtually living in an information saturated environment.

This paper further hinges its argument on the following facts as they relate to the widespread adoption and use of new media technologies in Nigeria.

1. About 75 per cent of Nigeria's population that use the Internet are on the social media, as revealed by the Minister of Communications, Mr. Adebayo Shittu cited earlier. The minister disclosed that "The size of social media, taken as a whole, can be overwhelming. As of June 2016, there were about 80 million tweets per day. Facebook chat usage is currently over one billion messages daily, according to the Nielsen report of 2016." (*The Punch*, November 17, 2017). What this points to is the extent of social media literacy among the Nigerian population which could be adjudged high in view of the figures quoted here.

2. Social media patronage by Nigerians as at October, 2018 indicates the

following:

i.   Facebook   78.71%
ii. Twitter   7.88%
iii. Pinterest   6.16%
iv. Instagram   3.35%
v.   Youtube   2.86%
vi. Reditt   0.41%
     Source ()

The statistics above shows that Facebook is most patronised by Nigerians. This is significant because both the young and old are engrossed in the use of this medium to connect with friends all over the world. Importantly, such communications are not just about personal issues that individuals would want their followers to know about but posts on societal matters as received by such users which are forwarded to those in their contacts. We cannot deny that this promotes media literacy and enhance dissemination of information. People get to know of happenings the world over quickly by receiving posts from their contacts on social media.

3.   In addition, *ThisDay* Newspaper (online version, accessed 04/01/2019) reports that active mobile telephone lines in Nigeria in 2018 had hit 162 million (https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2018/07/06/active-mobile-telephone-lines-in-nigeria-hit-162m/). The newspaper adds that "With 162,075,116 lines in May and 160,081,051 in April, the increase in the number of lines was 1,994,065". It also revealed that Teledensity rose by 143 in May to 11,609 as against 11,466 in April. The newspaper further quotes The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) as saying "Teledensity is the number of telephone connections for every 100 individuals living within an area and it varies widely across the country". This points to increase in telecoms use in Nigeria as a plank upon which social media technology operate.

4.   On literacy level in Nigeria, statistics available from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) are also encouraging as indicated below. The National Literacy Survey, 2010 (the most recent conducted to the best of knowledge of the researchers available @ www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/download/43, accessed on 27/11/2018) presents categories of literacy on age brackets as follows:

Youth Literacy Rates:
– National youth literacy rate in English Language stood at 76.3%
– Male = 81.0
– Female = 71.4
– National youth literacy rate in any language stood at 85.6%

– Male = 89.4

– Female = 81.6

Adult Literacy Rates:

– National adult literacy rate in English Language stood at 57.9%

– Male = 65.1

– Female = 50.6

– National adult literacy rate in any language stood at 71.6%

– Male = 79.3

– Female = 63.7

The rates for males are higher than those of females. The rates are also higher in urban than in the rural areas.

What is interesting about these figures is that aside of the fact that literacy rate is appreciating in Nigeria, the fact that communication on social media is done in both English and the numerous indigenous languages spoken in the country again widens the scope of participation in the use of the social media which further boosts the issue of inclusiveness.

The foregoing argument of bridging the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor could be summarized in the opinion of Betiang (2016, p.120) as follows:

> The 'other' within the mass arrangement is gradually moving out of being a mere set of data for statistical analysis by power brokers into a valued distinct human being that craves understanding; and can carve a niche for space within the global *agora* to think or say his/her mind without let or hindrance.

It is worth noting that the 'other' referred to in the above quote is the underprivileged who once had no voice in the conventional media but has been elevated to a plane of recognition by the new media to be seen and heard. The underprivileged is no longer a passive observer of the goings-on in the media world; rather he has been empowered to be an active participant in the process. Evidently, the 'other' who has been manipulated for long by those who had the media monopoly, has suddenly become the manipulator himself. The recent disturbing episodes of 'cloned' messages on the social media are clear evidence of the shift in power from the hands of media monopolists to the general public. The media are now in the hands of everybody! The era of monopoly is over as the dawn of true media democratisation sets in even though with perceived double-edged consequences on society.

If we are to take a clue from what happened in the popular *Arab Spring* in North African recent history, one would not dispute the power of the social media for

mobilisation. Those who participated in the uprising referred to above were mobilised through the social media. In this case, the same information became available to the poor and the rich alike. Indeed, the information poor became information rich to the point that they saw the need to rise against the authorities. In the days gone by when information was the monopoly of the elite through the conventional media, what happened in the Arab world would have been a mirage no matter the atrocities committed by those in the corridors of power.

Conclusion

This paper opened with the postulation that the communication sphere as an area of study has been subjected to significant changes owing principally to the advent of technology. The paper further averred that the theories in the field of communication have equally come under scrutiny as to their validity in the contemporary setting. Parker (1973) in Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.374) has long rightly predicted that "As new information technologies become available, a whole new program of research is required to learn techniques for their effective utilisation". Byrant & Thompson (2002, p.379) also indicate that "New communication theories that explain the uses of new technologies are sorely needed. As the new century progresses, the continual challenge for communication theorists will be to catch up and keep up". An attempt at the 'catching up' process is what this discourse sets out to put in motion with regards to the Knowledge-Gaps theory.

Knowledge Gaps theory, as the focus of this paper, basically holds that the gulf between the privileged and the under-privileged in terms of exposure to information would continue to widen as new media are introduced in society. The paper contends this position on the grounds that the social media, as new media, are rather bridging the perceived gap because they are cheap, accessible, participatory and virtually free from control unlike the conventional media. This paper, therefore, concludes that the nature and applicability of the new media has created an enabling environment for the knowledge chasm between the information-rich and information-poor to be bridged instead of widening as postulated in the theory under examination.

Recommendation

In spite of the position of this paper that the Knowledge Gaps theory seems not to be completely at tune with current realities occasioned by the introduction of the social media into the communication landscape, there is still the need to take the argument further to the level of empirical validation. Whether a theory is on the verge of

breaking forth or tending towards being disproved, the logical paradigm of enquiry which is the standard procedure for evaluating scientific claims must be followed. In this case, practical studies need to be conducted on the extent the social media are bridging the gap in knowledge among people of different ages, social classes and locations.

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