



Research Paper

## The Mass Media; the #Endsars Protest and the October 2020 Carnage in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The world has increasingly become a global village. Special and territorial borders are broken down. National sovereignties are encroached without inhibitions. It is estimated that 3.43 billion people will be using social media network by 2023, a figure representing 44% of estimated 7.79 billion global population (Adepetun, 2020, <https://m.guardian.ng/features/social-media-and-carnage-that-trailed-endsars-protest/amp/>). The relevance of the media in the modern society has remained indisputable as it occupies the central roles in political development. Modern societies may be practically ungovernable in today's world. Political participation is ensured through the existence of the media. The absence of outlets through which the modern government reaches the people with information, and also gets information from the people, that is their responses to government policies and actions, may showcase an imaginary society than real (Layefa, 2015). Undoubtedly, modern society flourishes with the presence of mass media. It mediates between the governor and the governed as information disseminators which invariably fostering political processes and democratic values.

#### Socio-Political Relevance of the Mass Media

Mass media is tool of political communication which is targeted to a large group of people within a short period of time. It is refers to as the vehicle through which messages or information are disseminated to a large heterogeneous audience. They include newspaper, magazines, radio, television, internet and other mass media of information. It could come in form of either written, spoken or broadcast communication which the primary aim is to target a large number of crowd. In the recent time, the popular and commonest means through which this is achieved apart from newspaper, magazine, radio, television, advertisement, is the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, twitter, Instagram and so on.

The existence of mass media plays a lot of roles in what happens within a country. It could be termed as one of the life wires for national integration or vice versa. It is axiomatic to state that the space occupies in the society can neither be overestimated nor underestimated. Mass media is vital to either the existence of democracy it could also lead to a lawless society which is refers to as anarchical society. Mass media serves as a mean for surveillance that is used to provide information about issues events and rising development in the society. Equally, mass media serves the purpose of correlation which is to say it interpret events and issues and ascribe meaning so that individual understands their roles in the society. It could also serve the purpose of entertainment (Pavlik & McIntosh, 2004). Layefa (2015) stated explicitly the central roles of the media in political development of any society including Nigeria. These include:

- a. Provision of policy information
- b. Clarifying electoral choices
- c. Reporting on elections
- d. Watchdog over government; among others.

Mass media is not immune to various challenges which include among others:

- a. High rate of illiteracy among the practitioners and the populace
- b. Has economic environment
- c. Lack of constitutional provisions for press freedom

- d. Degeneracy of standards and skills
- e. Lack or failure to adhere to standards
- f. Reliance on fake news
- g. Inexistence of coordinating machineries.

The above is not mutually exclusive. They still include:

**a. Misinformation:** Information is power and when one is not informed he/she will be dis-informed. Mass media can sometimes be used by anybody to spread hoaxes and misinformation. In most cases fabricated stories has dominated the system whereby for one to really know the authentic story might be difficult. In recent times, mass media tends to mislead people just because of their individual belief concerning certain sector and because of the nature of reaching mass audience such information or new will be spread within a certain period of time which not properly analyze could lead to conflicts or war.

**b. Not enough fact checking:** due to the fact that every individual have access to mass media platforms they can equally generate information without having a background checking on facts before it's been generally carried out to the general public. No wonder some information gotten on mass media platforms are generally fabricated stories. Information spreads faster like thunder therefore there is need for through investigation to authenticate the originality of the information before it's been carried out. Even newspaper organizations sometimes do not verify the source of information before publishing for people's consumption which in so many has led to series of conflictual disagreement. According to Mashaal (2019), fake news is everywhere and sometimes people can't tell the difference.

**c. Avenue for manipulation:** mass media is a means used to manipulate the mindset of masses. Is the done by changing the perspective of individual to conform to their own mindset. In most recent time the mindset could have a negative effect on true democracy. Most of the media houses are business ventures which in most time they cannot maintain their neutrality. Most have become house of manipulating truth to sooth their interest or their employer thereby misleading the innocent citizen and giving out misinformation.

In most recent, mass media disseminate information on public policies, government development, programmes, public laws and decisions activities, budgets, and other sectors too numerous to identified. Equally, mass media make surveillance of the society and expose any potential danger to the public as well as set the agenda on the public issues that affects the society (Nwekeauaku 2010). The fact that technology evolves and changes drives the development of media. This could be agreed upon because every society either big or small, primitive or modern makes use of the mass media concept. The facts remain that as great as mass media is to the development of a society there are also challenges could undermine development if it not properly utilized (Grolier, 2013).Nwekeauku (2014) puts it that, the mass media are the instruments of information dissemination in any modern society, as they are central to the input-output functions of any state, whether democratic or authoritarian. Laswell (1968) observed that man usually looked forward to something to learn and watch over his environment such as new opportunity, trade and commerce, conflicts resolution, social changes, scientific discoveries and inventions among other issues that have public consequences.

### **#EndSARS protest: a synopsis**

The #EndSARS protest started on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of October where a viral message broadcast on social media suggested men of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad SARS had gunned down a Nigerian youth, snatched his car, and sped off with it. As the video spread on the social media, the hashtag #EndSARS started to garner momentum as many youth began to demand the end of SARS brutal police and many begin to recount their experiences with the SARS operation (William,2020). The SARS were dissolved on the 11<sup>th</sup> of October by the Inspector General of police and other Tactical squads. Joe (2020) posits that, two weeks of nationwide protests against police brutality in Nigeria was reported to have turned deadly on October, 20 as security forces fired live rounds the demonstrators killing several people (which was later debunked by the military establishment) even despite the fact that they were chanting the national anthem and pledge at Lekki toll gate in Lagos state. This information were discarded by the security operative and government agencies that no lives were lost and it was a plan to destabilize the country at large but still many citizens registered their displeasure to the information and called for international organizations to look and act speedily on the accusation.

Samantha & Arowobusoye (2020) perceived that despite the disband of the SARS and the establishment of another one known as the (SWATS), the protesters refuse to stopclamoring for #EndSARS and a total end to bad government which still went on until hoodlums and thugs hijacked the protest. The fact remains that many still perceived that the hoodlums were sponsored by the government even to the extent that several videos were seen on the mass media platforms where thugs were using government vehicles to operate and turned a peaceful protest to a violent protest. Which could be a major threat to democracy in a country and open doors for a lawless society. Shops, ATM machines, warehouse, government properties and so on were destroyed and vandalized in some part of the country and even correctional service centers were broken and inmates were freed, destruction of some BRT buses in Lagos, the TVC stations, palaces were visited and so on.

The country was awashed with the news that the use of the military force to quell the demonstrations could be said to be a shift from democratic society to anarchical society. The report of military men rising against the demonstrator even while the national anthem was widely reported by the use of mass media platforms whereby social medium were filled with images of bloodstained flags that has prompted international condemnation from around the world.

In most states of the federation there were report of sporadic gunfire which could be heard in several places and in one way or the other instill fears in the heart of many citizens of the federal which has made many to call out for true democracy. To end the demonstration, a curfew was imposed in some states of the federation after the peaceful protest of Nigerian youth was hijacked by hoodlums and many properties most especially in Lagos state.

### **#EndSARS Protest in Nigeria: Overview “Democracy of Anarchy”**

It is important to note that peaceful protest is a fundamental rights of the citizens in Nigeria. This is an accentuation that democracy is entrenched with freedom of speech and expression. The central point is the fact that democracy is a system of government in which power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or through their elected agents under a free electoral system. The concept of anarchy could first be traced back to 1953 which it could be said to be a society being freely constituted without authorities or a governing body. It may be regarded as a society or group of people that entirely rejects a set hierarchy. Can we therefore say that the October #EndSARS was targeted for democratic or anarchical existence?

Just like every other fundamental right in a country every democratic society equally has the right to peaceful assembly which is embedded in their constitution. But if protest is not properly handled it could lead to dispute which is tantamount to war and when there is a serious war the society can be crippled and destabilized and at the end of the day law will be useless in the land and anarchy set in.

The Nigerian youth embarked on a peaceful protest tagged #EndSARS to demand the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) unit, as well as other reforms in the Nigerian Police Force (NPF). Based on the happening, the protest cut across all states of the federation until it was hijacked by hoodlums who went as far as vandalizing property in some states. The protest at the aftermath was characterized by the heavy presence of security personnel. William (2020) noted that, the #EndSARS movement is dated back to 2017 where Nigerian youth used the hashtag to share their experiences on violence and assault perpetrated by the defunct squad. The movement led to a protest after a video emerged of police officer who was thought to be a member of the SARS unit allegedly killed an unarmed young man. Without doubt, through the use of mass media platforms the video was circulated to all corner. With the spread of the video, many young Nigerian youths used the opportunity to recall their experiences and started lamenting on social media platforms which escalated into a fury of outburst that eventually morphed into one of the largest youth organized protest in Nigeria.

### **The Mass Media, #EndSARS Protest, and the Asymmetric Carnage After**

The impact of symbiotic relationship between the mass media, the protest and the carnage that engulfed the country thereafter is enormous and should be documented. People are fed with information and misinformed via the online space. Most of the times without proper checks and balances. Lots of people have taken decisions rather rashly which they later regretted. So many post have equally be brought down severally on the account of them been fake.

The carnage that greeted the #EndSARS protest was not immune to the misinformation and unsubstantiated information in the media. Consequently, some information sourced from the social media without adequate verifications led to massive destruction of lives and properties, and investments belong to Lagos state government and private individuals. It must be noted that the spread of fake news is not only limited to Nigeria space alone. Social media propaganda have become the order of the day across the globe. From the USA to UK, Hong Kong to China, Germany to France, Egypt to Tunisia, the social media space has been explored unconventionally and has misled the people (Adepetun, 2020,).

In Nigeria, the tagging of shooting at the Lekki toll gate as “Lekki Massacre” triggered the huge unrest, and subsequently the carnage that engulfed the whole country with huge unrest and wanton destruction of lives and properties. Media misinformed the public by dishing out various numbers of figures that were killed during the shooting. Videos and pictures of various degrees were broadcasted and showed on social media. “What a massacre without a blood?” Instantaneously, hoodlums took over the street. Properties including government establishments, prisons, broadcast stations, newspaper houses, police stations, hospitals, bus stations, and buses, banks, shopping malls, grocery stores, ATMs were not spared in the carnage. It is understatement that this attacks have put thousands of people into socio-economic problems. It has even aggravates the negative impacts and effect of COVID-19 pandemic on the national economy. Today government and public agencies are finding it difficult to pay workers’ salaries and emoluments. The whole country is gripping with the impact of the protest.

### **The Cost of #EndSARS Protest in Nigeria**

The cost of the protest is enormous in both human and financial capital. In its submission, the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) disclosed that Nigeria lost more than N700 billion in economic values to the protest and the carnage that ensued thereafter. According to the president of the Chamber, Mrs Toki Mabogunje, “LCCI uncovered that the Nigerian economy has suffered an estimated N700 billion in the past twelve days” (<https://nairametrics.com/2020/10/20>). She further posited that: this action has been a great cost to the economy and the welfare of Nigerian citizens. It should be noted that our economy is still reeling from the shocks of COVID-19 pandemic and struggling to recover from its devastating effects.

As the protest lasted, the economists and financial experts have made an estimate that businesses in the country lost at least N10 billion daily to the protest. Accordingly, nairametrics reported that the Lagos state Government lost at least N234 million to the closure of the tollgate.

The economic cost of the protest according to the Punch, (November 11, 2020) is estimated at N1.5 trillion approximately 1.03 per cent of the GDP and 11.47% of the 2021 budget. As submitted by the Financial Derivative Company limited led by Bismarck Rawane. The protest magnified the existing output challenges and supply chain disruptions... about 1800 truck of commodities, food supply, finished goods, and other raw materials and logistics enter Lagos on daily basis. A noticeable trend during our survey was that highly perishables and seasonal commodities were severely impacted. Food prices skyrocketed with major food items costing significantly higher than previous months. For instance, a 50kg bag of rice that used to be sold at N26,000 rose to N32,000. A bag of onions that was N20,000 in January was increased to N80,000. A bag of garri also sells up to N20,000 higher than before. This is in fact that the protesters “in some instances destroyed food stores” (Premium Times, November 20, 2020).

In a nutshell, the socio-political and economic cost of the protest is enormous and the impact will take a magnitude period of time to overcome. At the last count, at least 69 people died as a result of the protest all over the country. The breakdown shows that 51 civilians 11 police officers and seven soldiers died, while several people were injured.

## **II. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS:**

It is indubitable that mass media is paramount to democratic sustainability vis-à-vis political development. The abuse of mass media threw Nigeria into conflagration in October 2020 with fake news of “Lekki massacre”. The youth had expressed their political right with #EndSARS protest in Nigeria whereby thousands of young people took across the street both home and abroad to call for the dissolution of Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The segment of the police force was accused of extortion, extrajudicial killings, rape and torture. Nevertheless, the credibility of mass media report can be a major problem which could pose a threat to the development of country at large if not properly handled and controlled which Nigeria witnessed in full done in October 2020. Information is vital, yet misinformation and disinformation is a death Nell of any nation if is not properly managed.

1. The social media should be regulated to curtail the unwarranted spread of fake and unverified news. The social space must be sanitized.

2. There is need to prioritize and embark on practical digital literacy for all. In order to seize the opportunities and overcome the challenges of the digital age, citizens must be equipped with digital education and 21<sup>st</sup> century transferable skills. This will enable the citizens to be efficient in the use of digital tools and applications, communications, team work, creativity and most especially critical thinking skills.

3. In addition to the above, cyber security and technology ethics must be part of the digital education. These are to ensure social media and technology is utilized and developed in a secure and responsible manner.

4. The government relevant agents must also be equipped with technical capacities and capabilities in cybersecurity and cyber intelligence.

5. The relevant government agencies must get up to speed in terms of social media savviness to influence in ways that are sincere, honest, emphatic and credible. They must facilitate the transparent and free flow of information to promote public interest on media space and counteract the harmful practice, undue and unfounded speculations. They should be up to the task of spreading awareness and handling of security and ethical violations. Identify mischief makers and take appropriate actions. (Adepetun, 2020).

6. Validation of news coverage: one of the most important aspects mass media needs to work on is the validation of news coverage before it is being sold out for public consumption understanding the facts that when such events of new concepts goes out to the public it cannot be retrieved back and different people will read different meaning to the information been circulated speedily. There is need for through investigation and comprehensive validation of the facts before it goes to the public

7. Constitutional review on information been circulated: the facts remains that not every information circulating on mass media are true or not some are just created to mislead and misinform the citizens and also some are just created to generate traffic. There is need for a serious constitutional review on how information

are been passed out and absolute sanction on any information that is meant to tarnish and destroy the peaceful system of government which cannot be verified to be true. This will curb individuals just going into mass media platforms to release misleading information.

8. Government of the day should ensure that people have access to the right information and not play politics with the information needed by the people. This is to enable the people to effectively and adequately trust the government of the day.

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