Combating Cyberbullying in Nigeria: A Case for the Media and Information Literacy City

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Abstract

The value neutrality of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) affords users the luxury of determining the gratification to be derived from technological devices usage, whether positive or adverse. The outbreak of menaces such as cyberbullying, which is an adverse externality of technology's value neutrality, has necessitated the development of country-specific laws, established to address cyberbullying. While acknowledging the roles of these antibullying policies and other multidisciplinary control measures, either recommended or already in use, this study investigated the prevalence of cyberbullying in Nigeria and its control measures, through a review of studies that had been conducted in Nigeria. From the review, it was noted that most of the available studies were conducted in educational silos and focused on legal and psychological control models without recourse to the socio and techno-cultural context of cyberbullying as a derivative of information society. This article, within the context of information society, recommends media and information literacy education as a tool for addressing cyberbullying.

Keywords: information and communication technologies (ICT); value neutrality; cyberbullying; online harassment; information society; control models.

Value neutrality remains a technology characteristic that determines the use of a device or technological innovation and the gratification derived from it. That is, it is the end users or consumers that determine how a particular technological innovation will serve them. However, the liberal construct of the Internet has recently birthed issues, such as Internet troll, Internet bot, cyber stalking, and other forms of online harassment, which has begun to call for researchers attention with respect to the nature of social interaction in a computer-mediated context.

Cyberbullying is a new method of bullying using technology such as social websites (MySpace, Facebook, etc.), email, chat rooms, mobile phone texting and cameras, picture messages (including sexting), instant messages, and/or blogs (Notar, Padgett & Roden, 2013; citing Miller & Hufstedler, 2009; Beale & Hall, 2007). According to Lenhart, Ybarra and Price-Feeney (2016), the Internet is built on the ideal of the free flow of information and the ideal of free-flowing discourse. However, a persistent challenge to this ideal has been cyberbullying—an unwanted contact that is used in creating an intimidating, annoying, frightening, or even hostile environment for the victim and uses digital means to reach the target.

Research based on cyberbullying, as Myers and Cowie (2019) reported, essentially indicates effects on the target with potentially harmful long-term impacts on psychological development, self-esteem, and academic behaviors (an unpleasant and disturbing experience in the short term) and a heightened risk of mental health disorder in the long term. Lenhart and colleagues (2016) also stressed that cyberbullying (online harassment and abuse) can affect many aspects of digital lives, especially its tendency to suppress the voices of many citizens. Suppressing the voices of citizens is a violation of the fundamental human rights of individuals, which many countries forbid through constitutional provisions as well as regional treaties and conventions. In addition to these extant laws, countries are beginning to enact new laws and conventions to address cyberbullying and protect the vulnerable Internet users.

Countries such as the United States of America, Britain, Australia, and even Pakistan are notable examples of nations that have taken deliberate steps so far, in checking the bourgeoning trend of cyberbullying and evolving policies to protect the vulnerable and marginalized parties. In a developing country like Nigeria, the remedial campaign against cyberbullying has followed the trending adoption of legal frameworks with the enactment of the Nigerian Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015, addressing issues of child pornography (Section 23), cybersquatting, (Section 25), cyber stalking (Section 24), racists and xenophobic offenses (Section 26), and cyber terrorism (Section 18) among other acts classified as online criminal acts.

More recently, the Senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, on November 5, 2019, introduced the Protection from Internet Falsehoods, Manipulations, and Other

Related Matters Bill, 2019 (codenamed the Hate Speech Bill) to criminalize the use of social media in promoting false or malicious information in the country. However, the Bill has been received with wide denunciation by citizens and advocacy groups like the Amnesty International, based on arguments that it threatens the citizens' freedom of speech.

The suggestiveness of the perceived dissonance between the legal agenda against cyberbullying and the semiotics independence of citizens within the framework of democracy thus necessitates a more holistic approach that appraises and addresses cyberbullying in cultural context and intercultural dialogs. This study attempts to bridge this gap by projecting ethical awareness on the use of social networks and other media through media and information literacy (MIL).

The crux of MIL is the ability of citizens to identify their information needs, the mediums through which information can be accessed or retrieved, and how the accessed information can be used ethically for nation building and development. This becomes even more necessary in an era where user-generated content and citizen journalism are challenging the operations of the traditional media of communication, rather than being a complimentary role player in the mediascape. Mechanisms to minimize and control, as well as intervene in potentially harmful social structures and processes is becoming an increasingly important component of policy and governance in media and information literate cities.

Research Approach

This chapter, therefore, outlines the need for active MIL education that fosters responsible use of technological artifacts, while also highlighting some multimodal strategies and suggestions that could be implemented for addressing cyberbullying and other related negative and harmful behaviors in the cyberspace. I have two research objectives: First, assessing the degree of cyberbullying prevalence in Nigeria. Second, appraising the viability of MIL education in comparison with recommended or extant preventive strategies (control models). Accordingly, my research questions are the following:

1. What is the degree of prevalence of cyberbullying in Nigeria?
2. How viable is MIL education compared with recommended or extant preventive strategies (control models) in Nigeria?

This chapter presents a qualitative study, including a literature review exploring the degree of cyberbullying prevalence in Nigeria and the control measures that are either recommended or in force toward addressing cyberbullying in the country.

Cyberbullying in Nigeria

Recently, several research attempts have shown cyberbullying prevalence across different countries and regions of the world. Studies in Sweden (Slonje and Frisen, 2012), Finland (Salmivalli & Pöyhönen, 2012), America (Hinduja and Patchin, 2014), and a cross-national study in Italy, England, and Spain (Genta, Smith, Ortega, Brighi, Guarini, Thompson, Trippet, Mora-Merchan, and Calmaestra, 2012), provide evidence-based suggestions that cyberbullying is a developing problem across nations. Furthermore, in 2011, reports from a news published in The Telegraph about issues involving Sean Duffy who was tried and jailed for mocking dead teenagers on Facebook and YouTube (Internet troll), and Shane Webber who performed an elaborate online stalking operation against his own girlfriend (Barnett, 2011), are evidences that cyberbullying occurs in societies where antibullying policies exist. In Nigeria, although indicators showing that cyberbullying exist are available based on shared experiences, the availability of data in validating the prevalence, and degree of the act poses a challenge because of scantiness.

Adediran (2020) stated that cyberbullying happens in Nigeria like in other country, but it is difficult to express the situation of cyberbullying in Nigeria with accurate data because most of the cyberbullying cases in Nigeria are unreported in situations where it is practiced outside the confines of a close environment, for instance, a school. Although dearth of decided cases by the courts in Nigeria on cyberbullying exists, Adediran believes cyberbullying occurrence is not in any way negated as on other sources such as empirical research can be relied upon for its prevalence. One of such empirical research, Nwosu, Ementa, and Ejikeme (2018), in a study measuring awareness and incidence of cyberbullying among 140 undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikwe University (a Nigerian University), reported that 50% of the study population were aware of the cyberbullying incidents within and outside their circle. In another report, Adomi, Eriki, Tiemo, and Akpojofor (2016), in a survey of 80 Library and Information Science students of Delta State University, Abraka (Nigeria), found that 80% of the respondents had either witnessed or had been victimized through cyberbullying from different social media platforms.

Beyond the statistics, Okoiye, Nwoga, and Onah (2015), while assessing the moderating effect of cyberbullying on the psychological well-being of in-school adolescents in Benin, Edo State (Nigeria), found that the consequences of cyberbullying has impact on in-school adolescent's self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy. The study sampled 300 in-school adolescents randomly selected from 15 secondary schools in Benin, Edo State, using four instruments—Cyberbullying Prevalence Questionnaire, Rosenberg's self-esteem scale, Self-concept clarity scale, and General self-efficacy scale.

It was reported that self-esteem correlates significantly with cyberbullying of an in-school adolescent, r (298) = .287, p < .05. Likewise, self-concept correlates significantly with cyberbullying of in-school adolescents, r (298) =.457, p <. 05. Furthermore, self-efficacy correlate significantly with cyberbullying of in-school adolescents, r (298) =.261, p <.05.

Olasanmi, Agbaje, and Adeyemi (2020), in a study investigating bullying and cyberbullying prevalence among 150 students of the Centre for Distant Learning, Obafemi Awolowo University (Pre-degree campus), Ile-Ife Nigeria, using descriptive statistics, about 56% of the respondents have either been cyberbullied or cyberbullied others.

Recommended or Extant Control Models

Generally across the countries of the world and particularly in Nigeria, cyberbullying is a worrisome phenomenon. With figures gradually increasing in trickles across differing landscapes in Nigeria, researchers and policy makers alike are beginning to take multidisciplinary swings for finding workable strategies that could aid cyberbullying prevention in the country's cyberspace.

Adediran (2020) advocated the implementation and enforcement of the Cybercrimes Act and other laws relating to cyberbullying in Nigeria, noting that cyberbullying has gained normalcy and that many Internet users engage in cyberbullying without an awareness of the criminal connotation of their actions.

Adeniran recommended that the legislature should determine appropriate measures for curbing cyberbullying considering that the gravity of acts of cyberbullying varies, and so both penal and civil measures may be suitable depending on the case. Adeniran submitted that:

> It is expedient than an extensive legislative research on socially acceptable expressions and conducts be carried out for the purpose of enacting laws to curb or criminalize cyberbullying. Law reforms in this area should also make room for public enlightenment on the issue of cyberbullying so that the public will be aware of conducts amounting to cyberbullying and their roles in curbing it. In addition, it is imperative that there is implementation of extant laws in Nigeria that criminalize certain conducts which in some cases are instrumental to cyberbullying (p.16).

This corroborated the recommendations of Nwosu et al. (2018) that the government should ensure the enforcement of laws and edicts on cyberbullying, in addition to the proposition that intervention programs should be designed to nip cyberbullying

in the bud, and a rehabilitation scheme should also be designed for cyberbullying victims, especially those on whom the act has an emotional toll.

Adomi et al. (2016), tending more toward the formal education remedy, reported that their study was intended to help authorities of educational systems to know the cyberbullying status among university students, which would help the authorities to educate the students on the issues involved and plan intervention actions that will assist the students to deal with cyberbullying experience.

Corroborating the education remedy paradigm, Olasanmi et al (2020) reported that preventive approach through the parents–teachers education of students will yield better results than punishment-based approach often adopted for traditional bullying. Other measures recommended include police involvement and removal of computer privileges for students, adopting counseling services for both cyberbullies and victims (psychological remedy)

In the adolescent focused study by Okoiye et al. (2015), the researchers gravitated more toward moral remedy, recommending that adolescents should be oriented on the need of developing good virtues, be disciplined and have positive self-control. They posited that parents should monitor their children's use of Internet by observing their children's discussions and antics, while guiding adolescents appropriately because it will help them exhibit good behavioral conduct in their interpersonal relationship with their peers.

Specifically, the researchers posited that adolescents should be taught moral instructions in schools because it would help them to be of good character and potent the ability to negotiate relationships positively with other people in the society. Ijachi (2019), in a multi-stakeholder based approach, posited that more awareness about cyberbullying needs to be created in schools and workplaces through seminars, conferences, and other organized forum. Ijachi recommended that institutions, such as schools and workplaces, need to operate an open-door policy regarding cyberbullying for appropriate assessments and investigations. The researcher also called the attention of social media and messaging platforms to create and reinforce channels for reporting cyberbullies, while individuals, especially children, should be taught to adhere to online safety protocols.

Gaps Discovered

Cyberbullying is real in Nigeria as in other countries of the world. However, Cyberbullying have received so much attention as a school-based scenario of power imbalance, and this reason partly explains the focus on adolescents and youths across educational institutions. Essentially, the situation of cyberbullying within

educational context might have been probably derived from traditional bullying. However, cyberbullying is a longitudinal phenomenon that cuts across the different strata of the society and following the submission of Myers and Cowie (2019), looking at cyberbullying in educational silos may be unhelpful. Cyberbullying occurs within cultural contexts, both in country-specific terms and globally. Hence, the imperativeness of advancing the study on cyberbullying beyond the similitude of traditional bullying in educational systems.

The legal control model of cyberbullying is increasingly featuring in discourse across countries. Nigeria has an Act of parliament in place since 2015 prohibiting cyber-crimes among which cyberbullying is listed, and legal professionals and research-ers are emphasizing the need to exercise the provisions of the law to checkmate cyberbullying.

Additionally, the psychological control model is beginning to gain traction in recent discussions, with a teeming population of researchers now advocating for the emo-tional rehabilitation for victims, while the perpetrators are counseled against the destructive behaviors.

Evidences across the literatures reviewed expose a crucial gap in the antibullying dis-course, concerning the widespread disregard of cyberbullying as one of the trails of the world's migration to an information society. The World Summit on Information Society was one of the mechanisms designed to address important problems and opportunities arising within the new global communications landscape orchestrated by the emergence of information and communication technologies (ICT). The sum-mit, predicated on achieving a shared commitment to building a people-centric, inclusive, and development-oriented Information Society where everyone can create and share information, howbeit ethically, outlined some action points that holisti-cally address cyberbullying and related offshoots of the information society beyond isolationistic control models.

Article 56–59 of The Geneva Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action charge the information society to respect peace and uphold the fundamental values of freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, shared responsibility, and respect for nature. The section (article 57) acknowledged the importance of ethics for the information society, and called for the use of ICTs and content creation to respect human rights and fundamental freedoms of others, including personal privacy, and the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in conformity with relevant interna-tional instruments (article 58).

The section also charged all actors in the information society to take appropriate actions and preventive measures as determined by law, against abusive uses of ICTs, such as illegal and other acts motivated by racism (racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance), hatred, violence, all forms of child abuse (including pedophilia and child pornography) and trafficking in and exploitation

of human beings. Essentially, media and information being the active ingredients of the information society, need be incorporated into preventive strategies or control models of cyberbullying. Hence, the advancement of discourse on MIL.

Discussion

With ideology being the foundation upon which cyberbullying is established, and with the semiotic independence afforded by the Internet and social media within the framework of a new world information order, MIL education on a global scale and as a country-specific measure becomes very necessary.

According to Jolls and Wilson (2016), MIL offers both offensive and defensive tools of discernment and expression in advocating for positive human values and political action, and in recognizing and mitigating harmful media messages and effects. MIL education has long shown how it is one of the most viable intervention strategies in minimizing media's negative consequences and maximizing its positive influence on children's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Over the past three decades, it was found through an extensive meta-analytic review of studies in this area that media-literacy interventions counteract media effects related to risky and antisocial behaviors, including violence and aggression (Jeong, Cho & Hwant, 2012).

While acknowledging the efforts of Administrators and Proprietors on some of the measures to check online abuse, through user-generated controls by which internet users who have suffered abuse or harassment can report offensive posts and profiles (or by which users can delete posts having tendencies of causing harassment), it is imperative to note that more is required of online Administrators and Proprietors in combating this violation of human rights online. With the development of new tools and features, such as analytics and algorithms, provisions have been made for online Administrators to identify those culpable of this online violation based on given parameters. The trick is to find a common ground with the users without violating their right to freedom of speech.

Furthermore, the Cambridge Analytica data sharing scandal, during which a class action suit was filed against Facebook on behalf of approximately 50 million users whose data were utilized without permission (Liao, 2018), provides a lead as to how other issues, such as cyberbullying and online harassment, could be addressed through the imposition of a website administrative or proprietorship liability on the Administrators or Proprietors of websites and other online platforms where harassments ensue. However, the bottleneck associated with this instance is that control is left for a third-party intervention while the directly concerned role players take the back seat.

At country level, a national response is required of governments in addressing cyberbullying. Although the Nigerian government had attempted to address cybercrimes generally, cyberbullying and harassment is either lost or silent in the Nigerian Cybercrime (Prohibition and Prevention) Act of 2015. Besides, Nigeria still ranks among the leading losers to cybercrimes, to the tune of 127 billion Naira as of November 2017 (News Agency of Nigeria, 2017). Kidnapping, which is already a scourge in the Nigerian physical space, is also becoming a problem in the virtual realm as "cyber-kidnapping" of encrypted data poses a clear and present danger to the nation's economic viability (News Agency of Nigeria, 2017).

Instances such as those cited above give credence to the kid's gloves for cyberbullying and other behaviors identified as cybercrimes in the Nigerian cyberspace, especially on the part of the government. Although the effect of cyberbullying is still somewhat at a micro level in the Nigerian cyberspace—perhaps because of dearth of accurate data—it is important to nip the issue in the bud as soon as possible to prevent a translation into a devastating macro-level effect where democratic process is undermined, national unity is threatened, and national security is jeopardized.

Addressing cyberbullying through MIL education casts a demand on both individual and corporate role players. While the responsible and ethical use of the media and information is the expected outcome for MIL education for individuals, the goal for corporate role players would include strategic interventions through policy guidance and implementations.

Some of the strategies discussed below could be given operational shots (further to this study), as part of the intervention programs targeted at addressing the vice of cyberbullying, using Nigeria as a proximate indicator. This, of course, requires the robust participation and inclusion of a good number of local and international role players, and notably UNESCO.

1. Including MIL education as part of the national communication policy deliverables, which principal purpose according to Baofo (1986) is to provide a favorable framework within which communication systems and technologies can be developed and utilized in a coordinated, consistent, and systematic manner for the benefit of society. The expected derivative of this combination will be the society's preparation in dealing effectively and systematically with the complex problems and issues generated by developments in communication technology at the national level.

2. In institutions of higher learning, MIL education should not be left to the Department of Mass Communication and Media Studies alone, because MIL in recent time, is not a subject for professional application, but an issue of national and international relevance. MIL education and critical thinking/writing should therefore be included in the curriculum of every discipline in the higher institution.

3. MIL education should be cascaded down to secondary schools and colleges, in reaching teenagers and preteens, and integrating media literacy into school's curriculum, through the Federal Ministry of Education.

4. Parents are also prime targets for MIL education, as counterpart educators for their children, especially minors. Parents, as counterpart educators, should teach their children appropriate and nonappropriate content that children can be shared online. The parents should also teach their children acceptable and nonacceptable behaviors online. All these are possibilities only when parents are literate with media and information (educational broadcast focusing on MIL could come handy in this instance).

5. Taking a cue from Everett Rogers, MIL should be diffused across the various sections of the society, and importantly to the grassroot. This could be achieved by involving both governmental and nongovernmental authorities, like state governments, local governments, local council development areas, community councils, age group, and natural group associations, etc.

6. Support organizations should be established for the purposes of workshops, conferences, training, and re-training of MIL educators.

7. Nation-wide adoption and implementation of the UNESCO's MIL policy and strategy guidelines in Nigeria, for reinforcing or strengthening ongoing institutional MIL projects by the likes of the Nigerian Film and Video Censors Board (through her media literacy campaigns to schools), the African Centre for MIL (though training, research and advocacy on media literacy in Nigeria).

Conclusion

This study began by noting that value neutrality remains one characteristic of technology that determines the usage of technological innovation and the gratification derived from it. This presupposes that ICT affords opportunities and positives as well as threats and ills when deployed adversely. Hence, the onus of responsible and ethical deployment of ICT is cast on every user of the technological innovations that has graced the 21st century world, and that is exactly the gospel that MIL preaches.

When used for social interaction, social networking and mobile phones can be abused by user (students, citizens, etc.) who lack media-literacy skills and knowledge about safe and ethical uses of such technology. However, with proactive media-literacy initiatives citizens can be educated to maximize opportunities and minimize risks associated with the unethical use of ICT.

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