

# INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL CONTROL: A STUDY OF NIGERIA'S #ENDSARS

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## **ABSTRACT**

*Information communication technology (ICT) vis-à-vis the social media has proven to be efficacious both in the prevention of crime and the punishment of same since the inception of the digital age. Instances where it had been applied abound like in the Bahrain and North Korea. But a peculiar case where the social media is used to police the police i.e. the law enforcement agents is presented here where the #ENDSARS hash tag on Twitter availed the Nigerian youths the opportunity to recount the perceived atrocities of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigeria Police, which range from brutality, sexual harassment, illegal arrests and detention to extra-judicial killings. It forced the authorities to first, reorganize the unit, order an investigation into the allegations raised so far and later ban the usual "stop and search" by members of the squad. Secondary data analyses with contents from the different Twitter handles were followed. The moral panic theory of Cohen was apt in the explanation of the scenario as the perceived ills of a particular section of the society was brought to bear and hyped by the media and thus, a reform. It recommended that roles should be played with the rule of law in mind.*

**KEYWORDS:** #ENDSARS, information communication technology, social control, social media, Twitter

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Social control refers to efforts to enforce norms by preventing violations or discovering and apprehending violators. The role of information communication technology in ensuring social control has since the last half of the 20th century seen a significant increase, like its applications in the monitoring of the activities of the government by the masses, video and audio surveillance, heat, light, motion, sound and olfactory sensors, electronic tagging of consumer items,

humans biometric access codes, drug testing and DNA analysis etc. Today, technology with respect to social media is used not only to police the society but to also police the police. This speaks of the massive engagement of the masses on social media vis-à-vis national issues and perceived injustices meted by the government and/or its agencies. The increased prominence of social control via social media is fast taking roots as it is being effectively employed by both the government as in the Bahrain and North Korean cases as cited by Jones (2013) and Bruce (2014) respectively and the masses alike, as is the case of the recent #ENSARS hash tag on Twitter in Nigeria.

### **1.1 Information Communication Technology as Tool for Social Control**

Over the last two decades, the use of the internet has become pervasive. People are increasingly using computers and other Internet-connected devices to receive information (Jones, 2013). Roughly 55 percent of Nigeria's population report using the Internet to retrieve (both social and non-social) information on a daily basis e.g. surfing on social media sites, reading the news, and reviewing online classifieds etc. (Vanguard, 2017). One of the growing discusses of the twenty first century is the influence of technology which does not only provide information, but also an opportunity for people to communicate and interact with others. By connecting with others who are not physically close, technology has ultimately helped in the expansion of people's social network and has arguably provided a somewhat ease in people's daily activities.

In the past five years, the use of social media has exploded (Spitzer, 2012). It is reported that over a hundred million Nigerians (which roughly amounts to a two-third of the Nigeria's population) use social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube (Punch, 2017). Social media allow people to communicate with those who may not be in close physical proximity (Wikipedia, 2018). For example, an online gamer may play games with people from around the world real-time irrespective of the distance, someone in Nigeria may share real-time videos and images with someone in America with ease. This has invariably led to a plethora of information at people's disposal and has also provided a more participatory effort and contribution of people on social issues. Social media websites like Twitter have drastically increased the participatory role of the masses in who governs them and how they are governed, they also use this type of social media to respond and air their views concerning public policies and actions. The idea that people enjoy to

be connected and to exchange their feelings and wishes has been the success story for most of the social media outlets like Twitter and Facebook etc.

Within a few years, social media has become an integral part of the world. Young people especially cannot think of communication without thinking of online-networks like Facebook, Google+, Twitter and Youtube etc. which begs the question of why are people so enthusiastic about using these new technologies of virtual interaction. Since the time of Aristotle, humans have been described as social beings, and one might state that these technologies allow them to act out their crucial feeling of social belonging accordingly (Spitzer, 2012).

One of the most important achievements of globalization lies in the democratization and participation process as an important tool against oppressors, corruption, tyranny, maladministration and other social ills and injustices via social media (Zeitel-Bank and Tat, 2014). Syria and Egypt during the Arabic Spring are among countries that had witnessed the efficacy of social media and networking tools as effective tools in driving political remunerations and social changes.

The world over, media has continued to play a creative role in keeping the society strong. Apart from bringing fresh news from several sources, it is also seen as a guardian of peace and order. Media's role is not limited to just that but it is also recognized for its creative input into the making of a civil society. Crime has tormented the civil society for centuries but media's arrival in this regard can be seen as a blow to criminal organizations and syndicates. Often media has been successful at reaching the corners where the police and other crime control institutions have failed to or when it concerns the law enforcement agencies like in the case of Nigeria. There are thousands of such cases, in fact millions, which were discovered and successfully solved because of media's efforts and contribution. Apart from bringing up cases of corruption into public's eye and covering cases that require public's attention media has also been known for an impartial contribution to peacekeeping and maintenance of order across nations. Several times media has been able to successfully bring the deficiencies of the public agencies into light and raise the level of social awareness. Social awareness has been recognized to be the best weapon to fight against crime and this role cannot be played alone by the government agencies but the media alike.

## **2.0 THE CASE OF NIGERIA**

Nigeria has not been left out in benefiting from the influential role of mass media in the control of behaviors both those of the governed and the governors. This was the recent case of the #ENDSARS hash tag that had generated mixed feelings on Twitter since December (though currently with a drastic reduction in tempo). Nigeria and Nigerians on the first of January 2017, woke up to witness an uproar of the masses en masse against the perceived brutality of the anti-robbery unit of the Nigeria police force as indicated by @DjKintoy who posited on 7 December, 2017 that;

“@segalink its day7 and we still stronger than ever Nigerian youths am proud of you all. No difference between sars nd armed robber#Endsars” (Ayobami Akintoye @DjKintoy 7 Dec 2017).

Jones (2013) who covered the role of the media in the Bahrain uprising of 2011 posited that; “irrespective of political stance, both government supporters and activists alike turned to social media and the internet to follow unfolding events. The number of Twitter users in Bahrain shot up and dozens of Facebook groups materialized, the majority of which were posting updates, information, photos and events related to the revolution.” This was not different from what obtained in Nigeria as the #ENDSARS event gulped a major trunk of the Nigerian youths. Over two hundred thousand Nigerians participated (most of whom were youths) as submitted by @Strategist\_KJ that “WE ARE BRAVE YOUTHS that intend to #makenaijastronger and peaceful again.”

These youths actively participated and engaged the social media in this campaign against perceived brutality, as was made known by one of the participants who tweeted while replying to @segalink @OyomwanO and 6 others that;

“Yes i surely did but he have shamed himself already...they are very corrupt and they are not ready to accept it Over 200,00 people are complaining about them, don't they have shame, even shame is ashamed of them They are addicted to corruption and behaving so badly #EndSARS” (i believe in God @ibelievegod565 7 Dec 2017).

Vulnerable Nigerian youths recounted how the Special Anti-Robbery Squad of the Nigerian police had engaged in unwarranted brutality against the masses while carrying out their activities. Although the functions of the police

the world over include among other things, to search for malicious weapons if and when necessary; to arrest offenders; to prevent crime and protect lives and properties, there had been instances of improper use of brutality and the abuse of powers by the law enforcement agencies across climes which arouse the tension of the masses who respond in different ways, either hostility against the police officers, lack of assistance to the law enforcement or a public outcry against such brutality (which is typical of the Nigerian case).

Pertinently, the platform did not only cover the public outcry against police brutality but provided a form of assessment of the bourgeoisie by the masses. Here, the masses pinpointed an alleged conscious silence of the political class to the plights and cries of the common people in the society. This was brought forward by Drake Jones who posited while replying to @keaxy @MBuhari and 2 others that;

“These so-called big names won’t even bother because their families aren’t involved in these whole SARS brutality. #ENDSARS” (Drake Jones @Jones, JNS 7 Dec 2017).

This is in line with the age-long belief of people with Marxian orientation that over the years, there had been the conscious silence of the elite to the plights and marginalization of the proletariats i.e. the ruled (International Sociological Association, 1998). The adverse effect of such belief is a loss of interest in national issues and other public engagements which invariably lead to both political and social under development. The feeling of conspiracy of the rich against the poor was taken much further by Maro @Marlonge231 (7 Dec 2017) who submitted that;

“We say we are under policed. Yet about half of the men in @PoliceNG are attached to politicians and their likes (which constitutes less than 5% of the population). Some are rented out and the proceeds shared amongst senior officers. What a country.... @AsoRock #EndSARS”

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The above is in relation to the gross inappropriateness of the Nigerian police formation which is currently comprised of 370,000 men who are charged with the responsibility of protecting 170,000,000 people (Daily Post, 2015) which is against the provisions and recommendations of the United Nations. This is in line with the increasing population of Nigeria.

The growing feeling of insecurity in Nigerian and the fearsomeness of the SARS operatives was spotted to have pervaded the unending tweets. Femi @ daevees (7 Dec 2017) submitted that;

More“Please, if they stop you, comply and ask them stuffs politely, search with them, look for what they looking for with them, it might not feel right, but it is smarter and safer, please humble yourself in front of a gun, I almost pissed myself having 3 guns pointed at me.

#Endsars”

“please if they stop you, comply and ask them stuffs politely, search with them , look for what they looking for with them, it might not feel right, but it is smarter and safer, please humble yourself in front of a gun, I almost pissed myself having 3 guns pointed at me. #Endsars.”

The above individual recounts how he had resorted to fear (or better put, docility) while dealing with the SARS operatives and appealed to his counterparts to do same with respect to the law enforcement agents notwithstanding whether one is right or wrong, which best explains the position of Hobbes (1968) on the state of nature where brutality of man against man breeds fear of everyone and everything which is the bedrock of underdevelopment, since man would be afraid to venture into industry whose fruits thereof are not certain.

## **2.1 Allegations Against The Special Ant-Robbery Squad (SARS)**

The various allegations leveled against the SARS operatives are as follows;

ILLEGAL/FORCEFUL HACKING OF PEOPLE’S GADGETS: the law enforcement agents were accused to have been involved in the illegal hacking of suspects’ devices in search of malicious or incriminating evidences. This was put forward by one of the participants Holuwateenar @ohluwateenar (7 Dec 2017) who reported that;

“So SARS hacked into my friend fone, & started slapping him for having 2 gmail accounts. Do they ve right to hack into pple’s privacy. #EndSARS.”

Instances abound where the security agents forcefully seized the gadgets (e.g. phones, especially iPhones and laptops) of vulnerable Nigerian youths and

either force them to unlock them or they hack into them all in the search of malicious evidences. The position was corroborated by ObaMirinda|1207 @obamirinda (7 Dec 2017) who tweeted that;

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“SARS are now checking phones of young #Nigerians to see if they are tweeting about #endsars. Please be careful and raise alarm if you happen to be a victim”.

There were plethora tweets concerning the searching of phones which begs the question whether the 1999 Nigerian constitution as amended does not guarantee individuals the right to privacy, especially in relation to the possession of gadgets such as phones. Although the police have the paramount duty to promote peace and tranquility in the society (Royal Bahamas Police Force, RBPF, 2017), how they go about it should in the opinion of some concerned individuals, be civil, mild and with less impetus in order not to generate double jeopardy.

**Illegal Arrest and Detention:** although there is the general feeling of uneasiness vis-à-vis illegal arrest and detention by the Nigeria police without being charged to court, SARS unit has been accused to have been leading in this anti-constitutional act, the youths were mostly in support of the scrapping of this police unit because they are the vulnerable target and group. A young man, who recounted how his brother was whisked away by the unit since 2011, used the platform to appeal to the public in the bid of whooping up public conscience and to lend voice to the public outcry. He presented while appealing to the members of the social media community to re-tweet that; Adaeze @esteraluv2

“SARS took my brother February 2011, ORJIAKOR Emmanuel CHIDIEBERE, it's over 7yrs now,we have not seen him...please kindly retweet”

The individual was not the only one that had been allegedly maligned through illegal arrest and detention of members of their family by the unit. A larger chunk of the “wailing” youths followed suit in sharing and recounting their encounters with the unit (though some of such encounters are not evidential).

Some accused them of making the illegal arrests all to extort the unsuspecting public youths for instance, Moshlee @sophia\_omoh (7 Dec 2017) Replying to @Smartnoys @datmastermind said that;

“Dey took my bro 2days ago all because he wants to go buy food at d junction,dey arrested him even wif d food flask.we have to pay 20k for release untop nothing #ENDSARS.”

Although some real-time videos of the “illegal” activities of the unit surfaced on the internet, there were unsubstantiated claims by some individuals who directly or indirectly are victims of the brutal operations of the unit if allowed to persist these feelings were exemplified by tweets like; G: itsjoarmani @itsjoarmani (7 Dec 2017)

“I have seen first hand people that sars picked up and was thrown inside the bus just because according to them they look like criminals. A lot of people are locked up without any chance of contacting anyone. #EndSars #EndSARSBrutality,”

“#EndSARS the worst part is they will arrest u and keep u on holding charge for 2 year only to tell you to go after collecting pay as if that’s not enough they expect you to be grateful like they did you a favor” mirah @mirah2drips (4 Dec, 2017), and Sauce Daddy@Thamelarey (7 Dec, 2017) who replied to @YemieFASH @DamilolaEkun and 3 others saying;

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“How can you be Human and hit someone that’s not even a suspect with an Handcuff.. SARS must go #EndSARS.”

**Sexual Harassment of Women:** female tweeters were not left out in the mass protest against the perceived injustices and brutality by the SARS police unit. Participants seized the insurmountable opportunities presented by the social media (especially Twitter) to recount how they had witnessed (and in some cases, heard about) their gender counterparts allegedly being sexually harassed by some members of the unit in the name of carrying out their “constitutional duties” for instance, Pe†\*ify Arts @Stephensenu (7 Dec 2017) tweeted while replying to @Tbillion40 that;



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“They are already against the masses, I heard today that they stuck their hand into a girls panty in Palmgroove Lagos looking for what their mothers dont have in-between their legs, nonsense #EndSARS”.

Despite the fact that this claim was unsubstantiated, it however gulped more than two hundred likes and over one hundred retweets which showed the actual engagement of such a claim by the masses. The critical engagement of hearsays such as the tweet above relayed the desperations of the people and their unrelenting zeal in maintaining their stand vis-à-vis an end to the special police unit. Sagar Shah, Esq. (2015) retorted how difficult it is to prove sexual harassment cases and by extension, rape which implies that when dealing with cases of sexual harassment, extreme confidentiality is required. It can be nerve-racking to speak in public, as well as in a courtroom concerning sexual assault, which makes it almost totally impossible for victims to personally report such cases and which perhaps is easily spoken about by a second party as in the case of the tweet above (Abuse and Incest National Network, RAINN, 2018). Replicating the difficulty in proving rape cases, RAINN (2018) stated that “out of every 1000 instances of rape, only 13 cases get referred to a prosecutor, and only 7 cases will lead to a felony conviction” which presents the near futility in reporting such cases especially when it involves the law enforcement agents.

**Extra Judicial Killings:** members of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad unit of the Nigerian police were also accused of illegally killing harmless and innocent citizens. Although this is not peculiar to the unit but pervades the entire police force as there had been calls over the years to end such act by the Nigerian police. For instance, The Sun on 22nd January 2016 reported the then Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Solomon Arase calling for psychiatric test on policemen. It was reported that Mr. Arase, spoke on January 12, in Abuja at the Nigeria Police Force Health Policy Revalidation forum, saying that the force was considering embarking on such exercise amid rising cases of police extra-judicial killings in the country over the years.

The youths in the social media community seized the opportunity of the social media to also vent their anger against the extra-judicial killings allegedly perpetrated by the SARS unit of the police, for instance, Agbolade @iamwammy (7 Dec 2017) while Replying to @buisilyfe @esteraluv2 presented that;

“Those killings are extra-judicial killings & shouldn’t continue in a sovereign state & an egalitarian society. The calibre of people who are in the know does not make it legit. We should all stand up & speak with one voice for the sake of Humanity & Justice. #EndSARS.”

Nigerians are unhappy that incidences of policemen killing the citizens they are paid to protect have continued to experience an upswing. Members of the public increasingly witness security men firing at defenseless civilians, especially on the roads, killing them with no justifiable reason.

Vanguard (2017) shared in the opinion of the public on the incessant extra-judicial killing of harmless Nigerian citizens by the Police while reporting that “a human rights group, the Office of the Citizen of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, had accused the police of being involved in the extra-judicial killing of over 40 Nigerians in 2016.”

One of the people presented a case of a boy that was shot in the head by posting that;

“Yhhh the one about a boy shot in the head. Till now the poster hasn’t said a name or anything The police is not our friend and will use those kinds to discredit everything #endsars” (sedoo @sedoowayo Replying to @Emmanuel\_UCHE @DamiElebe, 7 Dec 2017).

The case of extra-judicial killing in Nigeria is one that is as topical as it is relevant as it pervades the length and breadth of the Nigerian law enforcement space, this is so in the sense that almost all the law enforcement agencies in Nigeria including the Army had been accused at some point in most recent history of such dastardly act. Gumel (2018) presented the cases of Army perpetrating such act in the fight against terrorism in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria. While citing the awful online videos that serve as evidences for such brutality of law enforcement agencies, Gumel (2018) pleaded with the Nigerian community to do everything within its reach to end such embarrassing acts which taints the image of the country in the international sphere.

### **3.0 DISCUSSION**

On the 28<sup>th</sup> day of September 2017, Segun Awosanya, a Nigerian technologist (Facebook, 2018) developed a petition which was signed by Nigerian and submitted to the legislature (CitizensGo, 2017). The petition was calling on the legislature, Nigeria Police Force, Nigerian Police Service Commission and other concerned individuals and stakeholders to scrap the alleged rogue unit of the police known as the Special Anti-Robbery Squad on account of unnecessary brutality, abuse of human rights, unconstitutional detention and extra judicial killings of Nigerian citizens. It was stated in the petition that “For over 10 years now the growing criminal activities of the Nigeria Police with emphasis on the Special Anti Robbery Squad (SARS) across Nigeria has been a topical discourse.” It was the aforementioned intimidations of the unit across climes in the country that gave the petition a national outlook. The issue started trending on Twitter in the early days of December 2017 when it became topical to all and sundry that had witnessed or experienced the brutality of the SARS unit of the police directly or indirectly. Individuals in the Twitter community relayed their various encounters with the unit and some backed up their stories with videos and pictures from such scenes. The lead campaigner with a Twitter account @segalink urged Nigerians through his Twitter handle to;

“Keep sharing your experience with SARS and @PoliceNG their impunity ends now. #EndSARS #ScrapSARS #EndBadSARS #ReformPoliceNG” (SEGA L'éveilleur®@segalink 2 Dec 2017),

“A people United will never fall. Let's do this together. The #EndSARS #ScrapSARS #ReformPoliceNG is an affirmative action by and for all well meaning Nigerians. Thanks for all your support. We are closer than ever. Victory is certain!” (SEGA L'éveilleur®@segalink 2 Dec 2017).

Although many Nigerians tweeted in favor of the petition and call to end the unit, there were instances of some Nigerians who were against the call for the scrapping of the unit, for instance, one Nwachibuzor posted on Nairaland.com, giving five reasons why the unit should not be scrapped and amongst those were; the stories as to the atrocities of the unit were lies, it will give room for more social vices etc. Nwachibuzor was not alone on this as the Nigeria Police Force was quick to respond to the allegations, warding them off and giving at first, criminal and later, political colorations to the calls.

Irrespective of police disengagement of the issue, it did not stop the political class from getting involved. Senator Isa Misau was reported on Premium Times (2017) to have backed the call for the scrapping of the unit while he raised the issue as a point of order on the floor of the Nigerian Senate on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December, 2017.

No sooner had the clamors began than Vanguard (2017) reported the Nigeria Police speaking through its Force Public Relations Officer, CSP Jimoh Moshood on the 3rd of December saying the calls were being championed by criminals who were being hindered by the unit from having a field day. Subsequently, the youths took to the streets of major cities in Nigeria (like Abuja, Lagos, Portharcourt and Asaba etc) to give faces to their social media campaign and this took the front page of almost all the national dailies in Nigeria.

### **3.1 How #Endsars Served as Social Control**

In the heat of the campaigns and rallies, the Nigeria Police was forced to act when the Inspector-General of police first on the 4th of December announced a re-organization of the SARS unit. Vanguard (2017) reported that “the Inspector General of Police, Idris Kpotun Ibrahim, has ordered the immediate re-organization of special anti-robbery squad (SARS) across the country, this was as a result of the #EndSARS campaign launched on Twitter by some Nigerians,” (Vanguard, 4th December 2017). The Inspector-General later ordered an investigation into the various allegations through the S-Squad, which is directly under his command, and to recommend punitive actions if true (Vanguard, 2017).

At a later date, the Premium Times (2017) reported the Inspector-General of Police ordering a ban on the usual stop and search by the SARS unit. This until 23rd December, 2017 (when it was announced), was their usual way (as pinpointed by the Twitter community) of unleashing havoc on the alleged suspects.

Therefore, it can be submitted that the public outcry against perceived injustices and brutality of the law enforcement agency which was relayed through the media, did not go unheeded which posits the efficacy of the social media (Twitter in this circumstance) in social control even in controlling the control agencies.

### **3.2 Theoretical Representation**

The #ENDSARS scenario that pervaded the length and breadth of Nigeria from the early days of December 2017 and remained topical till date (though with a reduction in tempo) could best be captured theoretically by the “moral panic” theory as postulated by Cohen (1972). Broadly speaking, the term refers to the way in which some social problems like the brutality of the police which generated the #ENDSARS imbroglio become ‘over-constructed’, generating exaggerated fear, anxiety or social reactions from the media, politicians, key agencies of social control and the general public, when the ‘threats’ or activities of individuals or a particular social group (like the police) are thought to endanger the moral standards or values of society (Cohen, 1972).

Emmanuel (2014), while giving an analysis of the theory as put forward by Cohen (1972) observed that the contemporary societies appear to be subject to instances and periods of moral panics. He submitted that Cohen compares the public outcry about the youth subcultures, to natural hazards and thus used the term ‘moral panics’ to highlight the ‘sudden and overwhelming fear or anxiety’ which seemed to seize the public discourses on youth like in the #ENDSARS scenario. Cohen observes that it is not that violence, brutality of the Police, marginalization of the poor by the rich, injustices and/or extrajudicial killings by law enforcement agents suddenly emerged as an issue, but the attention recently given to such issue through the deployment of the social media (Twitter to be precise) has made it a thing of public concern so much so that both the political class and the masses alike are concerned and are forced to act.

A moral panic is a reaction of the society to certain social groups (e.g. the police in the #ENDSARS scenario) or subcultures, based on the belief that they constitute through their behaviors, a major threat to the broader culture and its social values. Cohen’s definition also suggests that episodes of panic originate with interest groups (like the concerned youths who championed the #ENDSARS campaign), through the use of the mass media and other social institutions which deal directly with people. It further reveals that society and corresponding interest groups seek to restore the existing mechanisms of social control and make visible the role of individuals or particular social groups identified with deviant behaviors (Cohen, 1972).

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The efficacy of the information communication technology vis-à-vis the social media in social control cannot be overemphasized as it had over the years proven to be useful in controlling the actions of both the ruled (as could be found in the Bahrain and the North Korean cases) and the rulers (as in the current case of the #ENDSARS hash tag in Nigeria). The fears exuded by the masses in engaging the ruling class is alleviated by the anonymity advantage provided by the internet which aids them in critically engaging socio-political issues not minding who or what is involved.

It has been proven over the years that the power of the masses when united, cannot be superficially wished away therefore, the only way to curb uprising (especially concerning youths) in the society is for all concerned office holders to justifiably carry out their duties. Equity and fairness should be deployed in the functional roles of every individual in the society. The rule of law i.e. the supremacy of the law should be upheld in every length and breadth of the society in order to avoid acrimony and civil unrest.

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