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**Aloysius-Michaels Okolie
Hassan Saliu
Gerald Ezirim**

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Social Media and Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria

A. Jolade Omede

Department of Political Science, University of Ilorin, Nigeria

&

Emmanuel Adeniran Alebiosu

Department of Political Science, Federal University Wukari, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper focus on the use of social media by Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria. It also examines possible implications of Boko Haram group usage of social media on Nigeria and Nigerians. Furthermore, the paper examines the use of social media as a tool and weapon by the military in its counter-insurgency operations in Nigeria. The paper analyses the challenges encountered by the military in using social media for counter-insurgency operations. The paper relied on qualitative content analysis. The findings in the paper indicate that Boko Haram insurgents use social media in order to issue threat, shape public perception, propagate their ideology, raise fund, recruit and radicalize members. The paper shows that the military use social media as a vital tool to counter the narratives of the insurgents, enlighten and mobilize the people for peace and security. Also, the paper found that the military have challenges confronting its usage of social media for its counter-insurgency operations. Some of the challenges include the unprofessional use of social media by military personnel at the theatre of operation; and the multiple creation of fake social media accounts which misrepresent the military. The paper recommends that a social media directorate should be established in the military with adequate infrastructure, personnel and funding for the purpose of mining data from social media for intelligence, monitoring and analysis. The paper also recommends that the Nigerian government should massively orientate the public to be cautious and aware of Boko Haram group's social media strategies.

Keywords: Insurgency, counter-insurgency, social media, military, security

Introduction

African countries currently get the worst when it comes to violence and conflict (Dorrie, 2016). Indeed, over the last decade and a half, many regions in Africa have experienced a surge of insurgency, notably by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahelo-Saharan region, Boko Haram in the Lake Chad region, Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa, and Ansari al-Sharia and the Islamic State in the Maghreb (ISIS) (Ibrahim, 2017). Between 2002 and 2017, sixteen African countries have been affected by insurgents' attacks, ranging from the kidnapping and abduction of civilians to sporadic assaults on military barracks, suicide bombings in churches, mosques, schools and markets, as well as the occupation and attempts to set up administration for seized territories (Ibrahim, 2017). Two African insurgencies now rank among the most dangerous internationally: Boko Haram in Nigeria and Somalia's al-Shabab (Baobab, 2014). Boko Haram was ranked as the

world's deadliest terror group by the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015).

The Boko Haram insurgency is one of the major security issues in the northeast that has troubled the stability of the Nigerian state. The Boko Haram insurgents did not only engage in kidnappings, massive killings and wanton destruction of properties but also captured territories that were effectively under the sect's control. To effectively carry out its activities in the society, the Boko Haram insurgents embraced social media tools. Social media are an Internet-based information and communication technology that provides an interactive platform and opportunity for people to freely engage in private and public discourse through sharing of images, videos, audios and texts. Examples of social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so forth. Social media tools are cheap and facilitate quick and broad dissemination of messages to the public.

The Boko Haram insurgents appear to be using social media platforms to issue threat, shape public perception, propagate their ideology, raise fund, recruit and radicalize members. Nevertheless, social media have also been used by the Nigerian military and other security agencies as a vital tool to enlighten and mobilize the people to support peace and security. However, the challenge of regulation and control of social media; and the security implications of social media usage by terror groups has been a great concern to the Nigerian government and security agencies. Indeed, the direct and cheap access to the dissemination of information, consumption and exposure of the public to images, videos, audios and texts from insurgents could affect security agencies efforts at ensuring peace and security.

To that extent, what are the possible implications of social media usage by Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria? How has social media contributed to Nigeria's military counter-insurgency operation? What are the issues and challenges in the use of social media by the Nigerian military in dealing with Boko Haram insurgency? How can social media be used as a weapon by the military to confront Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria?

Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria

The term insurgency has been used interchangeably with guerrilla warfare, unconventional warfare, irregular warfare and revolutionary warfare among others and this has made it difficult for scholars to give a precise definition of the term (Itiri, 2015). However, this paper sees insurgency as an internal uprising often outside the confines of state's laws and it is often characterized by social-economic and political goals as well as military or guerrilla tactics (Liolio, 2013). Insurgencies have been classified into five namely; Revolutionary insurgencies; Reformist insurgencies; Separatist insurgencies; Resistance insurgencies and the Commercialist insurgencies (US Government, 2012). Revolutionary insurgencies seek to replace the existing political order with an entirely different system, often entailing transformation of the economic and social structures. Reformist insurgencies do not aim to change the existing political order but, instead, seek to compel the government to alter its policies or undertake political, economic, or social reforms. Separatist insurgencies

seek independence for a specific region. In some cases, the region in question spans existing national boundaries. Resistance insurgencies seek to compel an occupying power to withdraw from a given territory. Commercialist insurgencies are motivated by the acquisition of wealth or material resources; political power is simply a tool for seizing and controlling access to the wealth (US Government, 2012).

The Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden) insurgency is one of the major issues threatening the peace and security of Nigeria. The activities of the insurgents are mostly in the northern part of Nigeria particularly the northeast. The sect is officially known as “Jama’atu Ahli-Sunnah Lidda’awati Wal-Jihad” (People committed to the propagation of the Prophet’s teachings and jihad). The group is said to be established in 2002 with the aim of creating an Islamic state in Nigeria. The sect was led by late Muhammad Yusuf who was arrested after a clash between his group and the Nigeria Police Force in June, 2009; and was allegedly killed in July, 2009 by the Nigeria Police Force. Following the death of the group’s leader, another member (Abubakar Shekau) of the group emerged as the leader. Abubakar Shekau was considered to be more radical and aggressive. Hence, the northeast states especially Yobe, Adamawa, Borno witnessed the most violent attacks and killings by the insurgents. Indeed, the group has also become more vicious and daring in methods, scale of attacks, geographical reach and selection of targets (Udounwa, 2013).

Thousands of lives and properties including schools, military and police barracks, mosques, churches and other critical infrastructures were destroyed. National and international institutions have been targeted by the group, including the devastating August 2011 attack on the United Nations Headquarters building in Abuja (Udounwa, 2013). The insurgents used the deep forest (e.g. Sambisa Forest) and other high mountains in the northeast as a shield to carry out their attacks. Boko Haram kidnapped 329 and 110 girls from boarding schools in Chibok and Dapchi respectively in northeast Nigeria. Villages and towns (including Gwoza, Bama, Baga, Gumsuri, Monguno) have also been captured by the insurgents and their flag hoisted. Though, these territories were later recaptured by the military.

Nigeria’s security forces have achieved some successes in degrading the potency of Boko Haram through the killing of some of the sect’s key leaders and the destruction of key operational cells. The inability of Boko Haram to extend its terrorist activities beyond the northern region is also a measure of the security forces’ success in curtailing the group’s activities (Udounwa, 2013). There have been statements to the effect that Boko Haram is being financially supported by some wealthy businessmen and highly placed politicians in Nigeria. However, there has not been any strong evidence in this direction. The Boko Haram group engaged in armed robbery, gun-running and kidnapping to raise money for its activities.

Boko Haram as an ideological movement appeals to the impoverished masses exploiting social and religious fault lines in Nigeria (Udounwa, 2013). The socio-economic situation in Nigeria especially in northeast provides a fertile ground for the Boko Haram insurgency. The geo-political zone appears to have an extremely high infrastructural decay, poverty, illiteracy, inequality, unemployment and low standard of living among the people. Indeed, the Boko Haram insurgency is a clear case of the

social alienation of the people especially the youth. A large army of youth could not meet their needs which provide ground for a huge number of this category of people to be mobilized and recruited as members of the Boko Haram. They see their hope in the democratic process as being dashed. They are powerless and socially isolated from the governance process of the state. They feel disconnected from the values, norms, practices, and social relations of their community. As such, they perceive themselves as being meaningless to the Nigerian society and feel self-estranged; and because of this, they may deny their own personal interests and desires in order to satisfy demands placed by others and/or by social norms (Crossman, 2017). Consequently, they become a threat to national security and a willing tool for insurgencies activities.

Social Media and Boko Haram Insurgency in Nigeria

Social media are an Internet-based information and communication technology that provides an interactive platform and opportunity for people to freely engage in private and public discourse through sharing of images, videos, audios and texts. Examples of social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so forth. Social media are easier to use, cheaper, faster and more rapid (instantaneous) in reach. Social media enhanced the communication, interactions, engagements and mobilization of the people for peace and security in the society. However, social media do offer a potential platform for the dissemination of hate speech and incitement to violence, as such, it could become a threat to national security.

The advent of social media provides new opportunity for insurgents to communicate among themselves and to effectively carryout their activities. According to the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (2011), social media are more and more being used by terrorist organizations as tools for ideological radicalization, recruitment, communication and training. In addition to this, insurgent groups take advantage of social media to communicate with cyber-crime groups and to coordinate along with them fund-raising activities carried out in part or completely on the Internet (Kimutai, 2014).

The Boko Haram insurgents have taken advantage of the social media to propagate its belief and to reach out to a wider audience. Indeed, the insurgents use social media in order to publicize its cause. The Boko Haram insurgents appear to have made social media their contemporary communication tool. Indeed, it maintained a blog at <http://yusufislamicbrothers.blogspot.com> and use nigjihadist@yahoo.com as its email to communicate with intending members (Saharareporters, n.d, cited in Liolio, 2013). In January 18 2015, Boko Haram launched its official Twitter account. The British Broadcasting Corporation (2015) monitoring of the Boko Haram Twitter feed indicated that stream of short statements about the group's activities, claiming operations in a timely manner, in the style of Islamic State's one-line tweeted claims had been posted. According to the Organization, the videos released so far via the Boko Haram Twitter account have been more slickly crafted than the group's standard grainy offerings, with professionally designed graphics and high-quality opening sequences. However,

Boko Haram's Twitter feed has also suffered disruption.; the account has been suspended a number of times, reappearing swiftly but without the original tweets (BBC, 2015).

It is observed that the Boko Haram insurgents used YouTube more than any other social media platform. The sect regularly uploads videos on YouTube to update the public on its latest activities and often times to react to any issue demanding its attention. Also, the insurgents have used social media platforms to spread photos and videos of successful attacks, bombings and beheading of those held hostage in their camps. The insurgents have use social media to spread false information, abuse the government and those who are oppose to their ideology. They upload propaganda videos on social media in order to raise morale of its field fighters and increase perception of risk of fears among the citizens. Also, by spreading their propaganda and ideology on social media, an unexpected large number of people can be reached. The intention to have their messages go viral is to make their ideology appear to be appealing and have more people support their cause. However, the reliance on the Internet as a distribution mechanism has some drawbacks locally, given the limited Internet access in rural areas (Mahmood, 2017).

By the use of social media, Boko Haram breaks its traditional ways of propaganda among which includes sending its messages, videos to agencies on flash drives or CD-ROM. Also, the ability to spread propaganda via the social media may have diminished the need for a spokesperson who regularly briefed the press, contributing to the lack of a true replacement for Qaqa (Mahmood, 2017). Compare to other terrorist groups (Al Qaeda and ISIS), Boko Haram sect appears not to have the mastery and expertise in the use of social media tools and techniques for insurgency. Since the launch of the Boko Haram Twitter account, there have been inconsistencies in the group's media operation, suggesting that a lack of professionalism may persist among those responsible for publishing the group's propaganda (BBC, 2015). Since the original Twitter account was suspended, the feed has been less prolific (BBC, 2015).

The literature shows that violent extremists use characteristics of social media to attract younger audiences, to disseminate extremism, violent and criminal content, to identify potential participants, and foster one-on-one dialogue with young people (UNESCO, 2017). In other words, social media specifically can be facilitators within wider processes of violent radicalization (UNESCO, 2017). The Boko Haram insurgents have used social media to engaged in propaganda and misinformation in order to gain sympathy and support from the people. The misinformation of the public through social media by Boko Haram could instill fear in the minds of the people and make them panic which could cause confusion, disaffection and distrust among people and communities; and discontent against government and security agencies. It could also influence public opinion about the capacity of the military in overpowering the insurgents. All of these could damage the image of Nigeria in the comity of nations. Indeed, the use of social media by the Boko Haram sect for its insurgency activities could have consequences for Nigeria and Nigerians.

One of the reasons for Boko Haram sect in embracing social media was to recruit more people into the group. While Boko Haram's calls for new recruits have not been as overt or as globally directed as those of organisations such as al-Shabaab or the Islamic State, Shekau and other Boko Haram leaders have constantly urged the local population to rise up against the government, fulfil their religious duty and participate in its struggle (Anzalone, 2016). A study conducted by CLEEN Foundation (2014), on youth perceptions of involvement in Boko Haram in Borno state, found that 21 percent considered exposure to messaging as a major pathway into radicalisation (Mahmood, 2017). Online radicalization- process by which a young individual, or group of people comes to adopt increasingly extreme political, social, or religious ideals and aspirations that reject or undermine the status quo or undermine contemporary ideas and expressions of the nation (Wilner & Dubouloz, 2010) is a serious threat to the Nigerian state and counter-insurgency operation of the military.

Social Media: A Tool for Counter-Insurgency Operations

Counter-insurgency can be defined as an integrated set of political, economic, social and security measures intended to end and prevent the recurrence of armed violence, create and maintain stable political, economic and social structures, and resolve the underlying causes of an insurgency in order to establish and sustain the conditions necessary for lasting stability (Scott, 2007). In other words, counter-insurgency involves a combination of measures undertaken by the legitimate government of a country to curb or suppress an insurgency taken up against it (Liolio, 2013).

The police are constitutionally empowered to maintain law and order. However, the Boko Haram insurgency appears to have overwhelmed the police authority. As such, tackling this internal security issue became a problem to the police. To that extent, the military which comprises the Army, Navy and Airforce are engaged to counter the activities of the insurgents. The military in Nigeria is an important aspect of the national defence and its primary responsibility is to defend the Nigerian state from external aggression and internal insurrection which include insurgency. To win these insurgencies, unfortunately counter-insurgency approaches, which have been evolved over the years against insurgents are generally confined to successful deployment of hard power and giving less importance to the fact that influence and management of perceptions of population within the conflict zone is key for successful counter-insurgency operations (Kiran, 2010). The 21st Century conflicts/wars are moving into fourth generation warfare, which cannot be won with high tech weapon alone (Kiran, 2010). In view of this, beyond confronting the insurgents in the theater of operation through the sea, land and air space, the military have also taken its counter-insurgency operation to social media.

The military appear to have embraced social media tools for early warning, strategic communication, open source intelligence (OSI), psychological operations and to counter-propaganda. Social media are used as a tool of information warfare—a weapon of words that influences the hearts and minds of a target audience, and a

weapon of mass disruption that can have effects on targets in the physical world (Theohary, 2015). The ability to rapidly disseminate graphic images and ideas to shape the public narrative transforms social media into a strategic weapon for the military (Theohary, 2015). Social media networks are privileged channels to adopt for psychological operations, also known as PsyOps, which are organized media operations to broadcast information to influence the “sentiment” (e.g. emotions, motives, objective reasoning) of large masses, such as a population (Paganini, 2013).

Social media is correctly considered a powerful support to intelligence operations particularly because their analysis makes it possible to conduct Open-source intelligence (OSINT) operations to gather information. In the military sector, it’s possible to collect information publicly available on strategic targets (Paganini, 2013). Indeed, social media have become an invaluable resource for the military, since they can quickly turn it into a valuable intelligence-collection tool (Gelao, 2011). Social media users leave marks about their identity, abilities, predilections, movements, contacts etc, which can easily be collected and analyzed, even though they have a no more updated or active profile (Kimutai, 2014).

The Nigerian military appear to be using the social media for its counter-insurgency operations in order to complement its conventional military campaign against the Boko Haram insurgents. The essence is to get across to the world and to keep the people informed of its activities in a timely manner; and to bring down the Boko Haram propaganda machinery. It also uses the social media platforms to receive feedbacks from ordinary Nigerians towards policy formulation and review, where necessary. The former Director of Defence Information, Major-General John Enenche, stated that the newly established Information and Communication Centre will also be used to monitor social media to be able to sieve out and react to all communication on social media that will be anti-government, anti-military, (and) anti-security. The military have used social media to share information on the Boko Haram and other counter-insurgency operations in the theater of operation.

The electronic and print media used the videos, pictures and texts posted by the military on their social media accounts to report some of the counter-insurgency operations of the military. The Nigerian military at various times have used social media to upload videos and post pictures of their offensive attacks such as video evidence of successful military operations, especially aerial bombardments and interdiction of criminal elements and terrorists like the Boko Haram sect. Indeed, the military especially the army have used social media in the theatre of operation to counter the narrative of the Boko Haram insurgents by uploading and posting bloody and gory pictures on social media (Alfa, 2016). The intention of these social media broadcasts by the military appear to be in the realm of restoring public confidence in the armed forces.

Social Media and the Military: Issues and Challenges

Social media have become an increasingly important tool for the modern day military. However, there are issues and challenges of social media usage by the military in Nigeria. The military as an institution is being confronted by the

increasing unprofessional use of social media by its personnel at the theatre of operation. Social media platforms encourage people to post pictures, video, and comments about their actions; they allow people to interact with one another and often capture inappropriate behaviour and conversations. It is this behaviour that poses a risk to the military reputation and operation (Pomeroy, 2017). Social media also offers an easily accessible platform for information to slip out, unintended consequences and for rumours to flourish, some of which might be disruptive (Jensen, Pinkerton, Denney & Adey, 2014). These can damage organizational hierarchy, undermine trust in command or between soldiers, amplify existing problems and erode morale (Jensen, Pinkerton, Denney & Adey, 2014).

Another aspect of unprofessional content is negative commentary about a military unit or its members on social media (Pomeroy, 2017). This could be perceived as a threat to professionalism in the military. It could also have a damaging effects on group morale and on external public sympathy and support (Jensen, Pinkerton, Denney & Adey, 2014). In view of this, the Nigerian Army has expressed displeasure over the attitude of some its officers, who use the social media to reveal troops movement in theatre of operation; disclose classified information, as well as air their grievances. To address some of these issues, the Nigerian Airforce introduced an Advanced Social Media Programmes at its Air War College to inculcate in its personnel tenets of professional ethics in public communication.

The unprofessional use of social media by military personnel at the theatre of operation may expose the military and its personnel, and their families, and friends to danger. This is because vital military and personal information (including family details) can be exploited by malicious threat actors as a potentially rich source of intelligence (Ryan & Thompson, 2016). In other words, social media posts by military personnel can create a condition that allows a malicious actor (insurgent) to generate actionable intelligence from aggregating and correlating multiple sources of information (Ryan & Thompson, 2016). In view of this, the Nigerian Army has barred officers and soldiers on duty from uploading pictures and videos of their colleagues and operation on social media. The Chief of Army Staff, Lt Gen. Brutai believes that such social media posts are pragmatic problem for the Nigerian Army.

It is however, important to state that social media may serve an important function in strengthening the morale and wellbeing of military personnel and their families (Jensen, Pinkerton, Denney & Adey, 2014). Indeed, social media allow the military personnel to maintain close relationship with home; families and friends also find social media a vital lifeline to bridge the distance and dislocation of forced separation (Jensen, Pinkerton, Denney & Adey, 2014). Access to social media influences the emotional and physical wellbeing of military personnel; enhanced contact with family can strengthen relationships and feelings of intimacy, but personnel may also be distracted by the concerns of family and loved ones (Economic and Social Research Council, 2016) during military operations.

At the theatre of operation is the military and other security agencies. Almost all of the security organizations have embraced social media in their operational activities. However, the lack of synergy in their use of social media appears to be a

challenge in the military counter-insurgency operations. The multiplicity of security agencies using social media may result into conflicting information which may be a threat to the operational activities of personnel at the theatre of operation and Nigerian national security. The creation of different social media accounts by individuals and groups to provide fake news, misinform the public and misrepresent the military is a major challenge for the Nigerian military.

Fake news are distorted signals uncorrelated with the truth. Fake news may generate utility for some social media users, but it also imposes private and social costs by making it more difficult for people to infer the true state of the world (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) especially during military operations. For instance, a fake twitter handle, @DefenseMonitor was discovered by the Nigerian Defence Headquarters. The twitter handle is mischievously using the Defence logo and posting tweets as though they are emanating from the Defence Headquarters. Several social media accounts have also been created in the name of the Chief of Army staff. These fake social media accounts are being used for criminal purposes and to cause disaffection in the military; and to demean the personality of the army chief.

The inadequate capacity (personnel and social media infrastructure and equipment) to monitor social media is a challenge to the counter-insurgency operation of the Nigerian military. At the moment, social media is within the purview of National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), National Broadcasting Commission (NBC). These agencies are not security organizations but have the infrastructure and resources to support the monitoring of social media. Monitoring of social media over time is a useful tool to gather information regarding various trends and undercurrents among the target audience in counter insurgency and terrorist situations (Sethi, 2013). Indeed, blogs and the social networking sites have a wealth of information that can be gathered from open sources (Sethi, 2013). This activity requires personnel who have a flare for and expertise in handling social media; since colossal data has to be sifted and analysed, it correspondingly requires training of personnel and software support capable of trend analysis, collation and comparison (Sethi, 2013).

Concluding Remarks

The paper shows that the activities of the Boko Haram insurgents in Nigeria especially in the northeast have led to the death of several thousands of people and destruction of properties worth billions of naira. In view of this, Boko Haram insurgents' activities have become a major challenge for the Nigerian military. More importantly, the paper indicates that the Boko Haram sect adoption of social media to radicalize young Nigerian youths and propagate its ideology with propaganda and misinformation of the public is worrisome especially to the Nigerian military. This is because it threatens national security and challenges the military counter-insurgency operation. However, the paper notes that social media have also become a tool for the military to counter the narrative of the Boko Haram insurgents; effectively communicate its counter-insurgency operations and other military activities directly to the people thereby boosting public confidence in the military.

The paper identified some challenges confronting the military in the use of social media in its counter-insurgency operations. Among which are unprofessional use of social media by military personnel at the theatre of operation; and the multiple creation of fake social media accounts which misrepresent the military in order to cause confusion and disaffection among the Nigerian citizens and the military. It is the contention of this paper therefore, that the use of social media by the Boko Haram insurgents will not end too soon considering the nature of regulation and control of social media in Nigeria. Meanwhile, due to the potential danger of social media to national security and counter-insurgency operations, the capacity of the military to use social media will be greatly enhanced.

Recommendations

1. For the military to effectively tackle the Boko Haram insurgents through the use of social media, the government must review its national security policy to include a comprehensive social media policy as part of its strategic communications tools and weapon in counter-insurgency operation.
2. A social media directorate should be established in the military with adequate infrastructure, personnel and funding for the purpose of gathering data from social media for intelligence, monitoring and analysis.
3. Military personnel should be effectively trained on the professional use of social media, if they have to use it.
4. The Nigerian government should liaise regularly with social media companies to bring down from the internet any message, picture or video uploaded on social media sites by the Boko Haram group.
5. The Nigerian government should massively orientate the public to be cautious and aware of Boko Haram group's social media strategies. The citizens should be made to understand the implications of Boko Haram insurgents' activities on social media. Also, the public should be made to understand the threats social media posed to national security.

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