

New Public Sphere, New Culture of Popular Dissent and Democratization in Nigeria

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Abstract

A transformation of the public sphere driven by information and communication technology is taking place across different parts of the world. Information about abuses of political rule easily circulate to the masses and drive different forms of critical actions from social media to physical protests and dissensions. The new public sphere which is hosted in large part by the new/social media, provides a virtual context of hard, open engagement of the state and its institutions by the masses. Easy access to the new public sphere, relative safety of its actors, and vast communicative participation hold potentials for expanding the democratic space. In the Nigerian case, however, the nexus of growing vigor of the public sphere and democratization is yet to be established. This paper argues that the emerging culture of dissent against authoritarian rule while growing in internet robustness, ignores the decisive framework of electoral participation to achieve change in political power and extend and embed democracy in Nigeria. Focusing on two major national protests, namely the Occupy Nigeria protest of 2012 and End SARS protest in 2020, the paper explores state responses on the selected episodes of popular dissent supported by the new public sphere and how they bear on civil, political, and social rights as major indicators of democracy's status. Overall, the internet-driven expansion of the discursive and activist public sphere is yet a net gain for democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democratization, dissent, End SARSs, new public sphere, Occupy Nigeria.

Introduction

The paper explores whether the widening activism in the public sphere occasioned by the cumulative effects of the growth of social media (new

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media) on politics is extending and embedding democratic rights in Nigeria. The growth of social media and the internet in Nigeria expands the spaces of mass involvement in public debates, critical public actions, and even physical demonstrations. Since the power of democracy draws from participation, it is important to know how the new public sphere that emerged in the age of the internet and the type of public participation it engenders bear on the development of democratic rights.

This study sees that net progress on the three core democratic rights: civil rights, political rights, and social rights articulated by Marshall¹ translates to democratization. This notion of democratization focuses on the end state of democracy but also accepts institutional requirements of democracy like elections, rule of law, party politics, parliament, and other referents as other necessary conditions for democracy. Democracy results from the capacity of the above institutions to yield democratic citizenship through civil, political, and social rights.

Citizenship rights have evolved gradually over the ages and have been products of dialectical encounter among social forces that interact in the public sphere. Some historic landmarks in the struggle for what we know today as democratic rights include the Magna Carta, in which the English nobility won property rights over the monarchy. Also, the English Revolution pitted the rising bourgeoisie against the monarchical and feudal traditions. The same bourgeois revolution saw the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie with the coordinating role of the Jacobins during the French Revolution. The most significant impact of bourgeois democratic revolution was the elevation of democracy as the universal standard for political organization of society. Thus, anticolonial struggles and continuing struggles for democratic governance revolved and continue to revolve around the rights of democratic citizenship.

Among the core democratic rights, social rights, which relate to a level of material care of the citizens by the state, are not accounted for in minimalist democracy scholarship. Nonetheless, Ibeanu² argues that political freedom and material wellbeing constitute an organic unity. Issues of wellbeing grounded on social rights are integral to why citizens engage the state. While adopting this sense that social rights need to be accounted for in studies of democratization, it is viewed here in terms of state capacity in regard to Human Development Indices (HDIs). HDIs measure access to education, healthcare, expected years in school, mean years in school, and Gross National Income (GNI) per capita. The other referents of democracy in my discourse, civil and political rights would for this study, be drawn from Freedom House and Varieties of

¹ Thomas H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Classes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1950).

² Okechukwu Ibeanu, "State and economy in the fourth republic," in *Between theory and Practice of Democracy in Nigeria*, eds. Elochukwu. Amucheazi and Okechukwu. Ibeanu (London: Adonis & Abbey, 2008), 223.

Democracy databases to “present” the trends in Nigeria over the first two decades of democratization.

In the unfolding neoliberal era, the drive towards marketizing various services in order to end the so-called “nanny state” is worsening economic hardship in African states. One sector of the economy affected by neo-liberalization is the supply of petroleum product which the Nigerian government purports to subsidize for her citizens. The government intends to take away the subsidy and in the several attempts to do this, citizen groups have posed stiff resistance to it. While this type of struggle is not new, the new development that invites research attention to it, is how it relates with the emerging virtual space of interaction of social forces via social media. The social or new media infuses the civic space with vigor by increasing new forms of information sharing on the internet and prompting the growth of active citizenship, which is essential for the development of democracy. An increasing robustness of the new public sphere of citizen conversation enabled by the internet-supported new media tends to make the citizens’ voice more assertive and more audible to a wider spectrum of audience. Since voice is crucial to democracy, this paper is interested in exploring whether the new public sphere is leading to a net movement towards civil, political, and social rights which constitute democratic citizenship. For the purpose of this paper, democratization is taken to be net movement towards the actualization of the three core rights of democratic citizenship as articulated by T.H. Marshal (1950).

A Discursive synchronization of the key concepts

This section presents the meanings and logic of use of the key concepts in the work, especially the two pairs of 1) public sphere and new public sphere, 2) social media and new media. The addition of “new” to public sphere merely expresses the changes brought about by new technology and modes of communication that have changed the old ways and character of the public sphere, while its essential political function or value remains intact. Also, the media, which is similar to contexts of debating and literary societies, provide the framework for public space interactions. Such interactions were initially limited to the traditional press. But the entry of the internet created a new media in the form of social network platforms commonly called social media. Thus, technology-driven changes on the media altered the nature of engagements in the public sphere, with implications for political rule. Hence, social media and the new media are synonymous references to the same kind of platform that hosts discursive interactions on the internet.

Focusing the same space that Hegel assigns to civil society and with a description of similar activities, Habermas calls it the public sphere. It is the space that lies between state and society where the public organizes itself into a bearer of public opinion.³ Elsewhere,⁴ Habermas suggests that “access to

public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion.”

The rise of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) opened up the public sphere in a manner that upturned the near monopoly of access to it by the elite. Presently, with access to the internet and an android phone, anyone could in matter of minutes, reach audiences running into millions across the world at a very little cost. This development marks an important transformation of the public sphere beyond the earlier ones. In ancient Greece, the public sphere was the agora, where qualified male citizens exercised citizenship duties of decision making and participation in jury duties in the polis. In the feudal times, the public sphere was in the royal courts that were dominated by monarchies and their nobilities. But at the threshold of capitalism, it was not only the mode of material production that changed, intellectual and social discourses also rode on the crest of growing liberalism to undergo alteration as we find in Habermas’ account.

Habermas⁵ accounted for how coffee houses, salons, intellectual circles, literary circles, and the independent press became important developments of the eighteenth century that changed the character of the public sphere. These groups subjected issues that pertain to the public, such as increase in the price of essential commodities, to critical engagement. The manner in which these activities caught the attention of the population and the ruling authorities led to the rise of a non-state public sphere. The state public sphere may be regarded as one in which authoritative exercise of governmental power takes place. But the non-state public sphere is more like a discursive space in which the feelings and opinions of the public are made known. Engagement with ideas and matters of statecraft in the sphere increasingly contribute to determining what the society, including the ruling group, adopts as the right pathway.

Enlightenment radicalism was decidedly expressed in the public sphere that followed that era because the sphere increasingly showed relative autonomy from the state, though not hostile or entirely friendly to it. Nonetheless, access to this public sphere was limited. The dominant elite had greater access to it with their resources of education and capacity to reach broad audiences. This means that despite the achievement of the Enlightenment public sphere in altering domination by the feudal monarchies, the power it appropriated was domiciled with the emergent bourgeoisie and intellectuals who had access to resources of knowledge and media for diffusion of their ideas and discourses. Using these resources, the bourgeoisie were able to support the four functions

³ Muhammad Z. Khan, Ijaz Gilani, and Allan Nawaz, “From Habermas Model to New Public Sphere: A Paradigm Shift,” *Global Journal of Computer Science and Technology* 12, no. 5 (2012): 42-52.

⁴ Ari Adut, “A Theory of the Public Sphere,” *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 4 (2012): 239.

⁵ Jurgen Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).

of the public sphere in favor of their social class. These functions as formulated by Rauschfleisch and Kovic⁶ include: deliberation; control and criticism; agenda setting; and identity building.

Major leaps in information technology led to a transcendence of the old public sphere for a new one. This was achieved through the creation of new media of communication and engagement via the internet and virtual spaces. The new media availed the new public sphere of opportunity for an essential element of democratization: namely, the amplification of ordinary voices. Such amplification was driven by internet connectivity, network building, open and extensive internet-supported public deliberation, interest articulation, and organization of resistance to repression. Thus, from a remote location, an idea could rise and reverberate at the global centers of power and lead to deliberations, critical questions, and adjustment of existing perspectives and policies.

The new media as shown in the works of Kandil⁷ and Kyriakopoulou⁸ was a major force in driving movements for democratic freedom that were seen in the Middle East in the past decade. Similarly, the Nigerian public sphere has been witnessing an increasing ease of generalized and diffuse conversation in the social media space by ordinary citizens about the quality of human rights, political rule, state institutions, governance, and human development. Such deliberations apply language styles and symbols that convey meanings about matters of governance to the everyday individual.⁹ This development gradually gains momentum and leads to increasing awareness of gaps in what the state ought to do. Part of the spinoffs of this development is the episodic events of contestations between the state and citizens.

One such event of contestation between citizens and the state was in 2012 when the upward adjustment of petroleum prices by the government led to extensive critical reactions among citizens in both the new and old media and ultimately resulted in the mass action of the Occupy Nigeria movement. Further in 2020, a phenomenal youth movement, #End SARS protest spontaneously took place in the country to resist police brutality. End SARS in itself was a metaphor for a general repudiation of all forms of coercive projection of force and bad governance. This paper sees that these events are products of an emergent new culture of popular dissent against an authoritarian state.

⁶ Adrian Rauschfleisch and Marko Kovic, "The Internet and Generalized Functions of the Public Sphere: Transformative Potentials from a Comparative Perspective," *Social Media + Society* 2, no. 2 (2016): 1-15.

⁷ Hazeem Kandil, "Revolt in Egypt," *New Left Review* 68 (2011): 17-55.

⁸ Kalliopi Kyriakopoulou, "Authoritarian States and Internet Social Media: Instruments of Democratization or Instruments of Control?" *Human Affairs* 21 (2011): 18-26.

⁹ Ebuka Igwebuikwe, Taiwo Abioye, and Lily Chimuanya, "A Pragma-semiotic Analysis of 'Occupy Nigeria Group,' Online Posts on the 2012 Fuel Subsidy Removal in Nigeria," *Journal of Visual Literacy* 35, no. 3 (2016): 201-214.

Extant Views on the Public Sphere, Citizen Action and Democracy

Proceeding from the tradition of Immanuel Kant's liberalism, Habermas¹⁰ resonates the priority of human reason through debates. For Kant, public use of reason allows people to discuss important questions through which they are able to expand their knowledge and progress in general enlightenment.¹¹ In fact, Habermas' major works referenced in this piece could be tied together by the theme of communication and reason. Drawing from that intellectual focus, he described the public sphere as a "network of communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes). The streams of communication are in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinion."¹² Drawing from Khan, Gilani, and Nawaz¹³ this paper adds that elements of the new public sphere, like globalization, the internet, and social software, which were not reckoned in the old public sphere not only stand in support, but also enhance the principles of Habermasian public sphere, both on national and global levels.

Coming from Habermas' philosophical tradition, Calhoun sees that the value of the public sphere rests on three core claims. The first is that there are matters of public concern to all citizens and to the collective organization of their lives. Second is that through dialogues, debates, and cultural creativity, citizens devise their best ways of resolving issues. Third is that the public sphere could make the state and other powerful interests serve the ordinary people. These core elements of the public sphere reflect the range of thoughts that Adut¹⁴ describes as the dominant perspective. While agreeing that deliberation and a vibrant public sphere are essential for democracy, scholars of the dominant perspective tend to make idealist normative assumptions about the

¹⁰ Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 2 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987); Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989); Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990); Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996); Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impacts of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 411-426; Habermas, "Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere," in *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Second Edition), eds. C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, and I. Virk (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 388.

¹¹ Steven M. Delue and Timothy, M. Dale, *Political Thinking, Political Theory and Civil Society* (3rd Edition) (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009).

¹² Jurgen Habermas, "Civil Society and the Political Public Sphere," in *Contemporary Sociological Theory* (Second Edition), eds. C. Calhoun, J. Gerteis, J. Moody, S. Pfaff, and I. Virk (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 389.

¹³ Muhammad Z. Khan, Ijaz.S. Gilani, and Allah. Nawaz, *Ibid*.

¹⁴ Ari Adut. "A Theory of the Public Sphere."

public sphere.¹⁵ The first of these assumptions is that public sphere engagement is characterized by *civiness* or civility. The second is the conflation of the public sphere with a space for citizenship concerns, while the third is that participation in the public sphere is ideal and egalitarian. But Adut¹⁶ correctly dismisses the impression of generalized civility with the argument that any engrossing communication or event in the public sphere is usually found to bear rhetoric which could sometimes be hollow, disruptive, and in some cases, with *ad hominem* attacks or malice. Regarding the conflation of the public sphere with a site where citizenship is exercised, Adut notes that there several times occur elevated group discourses that are irrelevant to citizenship, such as scandals and personal matters. In addition, participation is not egalitarian as assumed by the dominant perspective.

Adut's engagement with the dominant perspective brings a reader closer to the actually existing public sphere that pictures the Nigerian variety. The public sphere is ideally expected to be civil, but can also be a hub of abuses depending on the subject under conversation. In fact, the Nigerian *Twitteratti* as portrayed by Obia¹⁷ is not only militant but also abusive to the very extreme. This character cuts across all the social media contexts of engagement with the government and social issues. Secondly, non-citizenship matters tend to be significant in Nigeria's virtual public sphere. To be sure it is a space of religious engagements, discussions about private issues of celebrities, and in fact those of ordinary persons. Discussions of private morality also feature in that space. Then of course, participation is not egalitarian. Some opinions are actually weightier than others. Some actors in the space, like bloggers, command vast followings, and their views could be points of agenda setting.¹⁸ Such asymmetry of powers in the space questions the democratizing power of the new public sphere.

Further basis for questioning the democratizing power of the new public sphere draws from the works of Guess and Lyons¹⁹ who identified some negative strategic methods of actors in the space such as misinformation, disinformation, and online propaganda. Similarly, Siegel²⁰ identifies hate speech as one of the dark corners of the internet-driven public sphere. In fact,

¹⁵ Ibid; Daniel Gayo-Avello, "Social Media, Democracy and Democratization," *Multi Media* 22, no. 2 (2015): 10-16.

¹⁶ Ari Adut. "A Theory of the Public Sphere."

¹⁷ Vincent Obia, "#EndSARS, a Unique Twittersphere and Social Media Regulation in Nigeria," <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2020/11/11/endsars-a-unique-twittersphere-and-social-media-regulation-in-nigeria/> (January 6, 2021).

¹⁸ Daniel Gayo-Avello, "Social Media, Democracy and Democratization."

¹⁹ Andrew M. Guess and Benjamin A. Lyons, "Misinformation, Disinformation and Online Propaganda," in *Social Media and Democracy*, eds. Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 10-20.

²⁰ Alexander Siegel, "Online Hate Speech," in *Social Media and Democracy*, eds. Nathaniel Persily and Joshua A. Tucker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 56-88.

Mutsavairo²¹ suggests that social media has a *Janus* face, which implies that it may serve to wield control, exercise oppression and systemic manipulation of power. Social media sometimes act as conveyors of ideologies that misrepresent reality. Yet asymmetric structures of domination and exploitation could be challenged with use of the social media. A further comparative study of the old and new public sphere by Gerhards and Schäfer,²² found that the internet is not necessarily a better communication space or more democratic than the traditional mass media. A similar view by Gayo-Avelo²³ corroborates the position of the discontents of social media when he noted that social media is only suitable for “blinkered deliberation” where users are not talking to each other but post messages for readers. Thus, he concludes that social media merely supports deliberation in public, not public deliberation.

To sum the above positions, the new public sphere has ambivalent functional relevance to democracy. It could be democratizing just as it may also be de-democratizing. Experiences may differ with various frames of reference. For instance, it would not add up to search for democratic contributions of the new public sphere from Eritrea or Equatorial Guinea and Ethiopia, where the internet and social media are unduly suppressed.²⁴ Comparative analysis would, however, suggest that Nigeria is one instance where democratic struggles may benefit from the increasing growth of the internet and social media. Also, in Nigeria’s specific experience, misinformation, disinformation and propaganda are all too common in social media, especially for scoring political points against the authority. Yet, the same social media has been used to expose and spread political excesses of the state, such as corruption, obnoxious policies of the government like the proposed law in Nigeria to muzzle the social media channel of expression, suspension of Twitter by the Federal Government of Nigeria for deleting a genocidal threat of President Buhari against pro-Biafran activists, plans to arbitrarily increase the prices of petroleum products, rights abuses, and various levels of governance failures.

While reckoning should be given to the power of disinformation in distorting the civic value of the social media, there is no doubt that social media still creates a vent for stifled voices which lack the capacity to reach vast public audience. To be sure, social media actively supports voice and access to public audience for marginalized groups. Voice itself is a crucial democratic right and a channel for articulating or demanding other ranges of rights. Social media also draws atomized individuals from their private spaces to virtual

²¹ Bruce Mutsavairo and Helge Rønning, “Janus Face of Social Media and Democracy: Reflections on Africa,” *Media, Culture and Society* 42, no. 3 (2020): 317-328.

²² Jürgen Gerhards and Mike S. Schäfer, “Is the Internet a Better Public Sphere? Comparing Old and New Media in the US and Germany,” *New Media and Society* 12, no. 1 (2010): 143-160.

²³ Daniel Gayo-Avello, “Social Media, Democracy and Democratization.”

²⁴ Dave Peterson, *Africa’s Totalitarian Temptations: the Evolution of Autocratic Regimes* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers Inc., 2020).

networks of engagement that serve as a market place of information sharing and debates about public policies and governance. Additionally, it provides contexts for strategizing during physical protests, as the Occupy Nigeria and End SARs protests show.

The Occupy Nigeria Story

The Occupy Nigeria protest was a mass citizen protest in response to government increase in the price of petroleum products. The increase in question was the result of a policy decision to withdraw the government's subsidy on the product. Subsidy is the part of energy cost which the government pays on behalf of the citizens to make the product affordable and reduce the burden of transport costs.

Nigeria produces about 2.4 million barrels of oil daily and exports the same products for refining since her local refineries are dysfunctional. As of 2012, the Petroleum Pricing Regulatory Agency (PPPRA) showed that the landing cost of a liter of fuel as of August 2011 was 129 NGN. The margin for transporters and marketers stood at 15.49 NGN. Thus, the price of fuel was supposed to be 144.70 NGN. However, the Nigerian Government in 2011 paid 79.79 NGN on behalf of the citizens for each liter of petrol, so the product was sold within Nigeria at 65 NGN per liter. With the increasing cost of importing petrol, the government saw the payment of the subsidy as a heavy financial burden with a total expenditure of 1.4 trillion NGN (over 8 billion USD) in 2011 alone. Considering the consequence of this on the national economy, especially the lack of funds to meet the infrastructural needs of the country, the Federal Government announced a stoppage of subsidy payment on January 1, 2012. Consequently, the pump price of petrol rose from 65 NGN to 141 NGN per liter. (Less than 1 USD).²⁵ The removal of the subsidy and changes in the price of petroleum products caused major changes in the citizens' economic lives, because there was a drastic rise in the cost of transport fares, goods, and services. In fact, the general cost of living spiked to a depressing point because there was no corresponding increase in household income.

In responding to this price increase, the national labor organization, the Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC), and allied groups argued, as it had done during the government's previous attempts to remove the petroleum subsidy, that the government had enough resources to sustain the payment of the subsidy, contesting that corruption was the problem of the sector. NLC saw that the 1.3 trillion NGN that the Federal Government expected to save by removing the oil subsidy could as well be embezzled by politicians while public infrastructure continued to be neglected.²⁶ For the purpose of retaining

²⁵ Innocent Chilwa, "Occupy Nigeria 2012: A Critical Analysis of Facebook Posts in the Fuel Subsidy Removal Protests," *Clinia* 1, no .1 (2015): 47-69.

²⁶ Ibid.

funds for public goods, the organized labor advised the government to rather consider a reduction of the bloated salaries of Nigerian legislators.

Further, the NLC called out Nigerians for a nationwide protest, and this happened for two weeks with support across the entire social strata, including professional associations, civil society organizations, the press, and several others. The protest extended to the main cities of the country, including the commercial hub, Lagos and the national capital, and Abuja, among others. Also, in support of their compatriots, Nigerians living overseas participated in the protest. Some of them gathered in front of the Nigerian embassy in various countries like the Nigerian High Commission in London, World Bank office in Washington DC, Nigerian embassy in Belgium, Accra, and others. The pump price of petrol was eventually reduced to 97 NGN. This led to the suspension of the protest even though it did not fully achieve its objective of total rejection of the subsidy removal.²⁷

Nigeria generally has had a long history of mass protest that places demands on the government. But what changed with this protest is the nature of organizing that is somewhat apart from the old system. In the old system, unions like the organized labor, students' movement, civil society organizations, and rights activists used traditional media to diffuse information about their demonstrations mostly during the military rule. It was easier for the government to track and suppress such agitations because they were usually announced with a long notice and by known organizers. Such earlier notice enabled security agencies to be mobilized in advance for frustrating such demonstrations. Besides, traditional media sympathetic to such agitations were easily subjected to repression because they had physical addresses and products like newspapers and magazines that aided information dissemination. These barriers to the instruments of the old public sphere appear to have been transcended by the new public sphere, which require no formal establishment of media houses to be able to disseminate information across the globe. Indeed, it was easy to plan protests on the virtual space and find an end product in massive protests like the Arab Spring and Occupy movements.

The philosophy of the Occupy Nigeria movement was a social metaphor to suggest that a space belonging to the citizens had been wrongly appropriated, either from corporate greed or political misrule, by powerful forces and needed to be reclaimed by the citizens. The Nigerian instance of the Occupy movement represents a local context of a broader movement that had taken place as Occupy Wall Street, Occupy Zurich, Occupy Hong Kong, etc. Indeed, similar Occupy strategy was also common in the Arab Spring.²⁸ Habermas²⁹ tended

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jurgen Habermas, "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impacts of Normative Theory on Empirical Research," *Communication Theory* 16 (2006): 411-426.

to prefigure the need for this reclamation of the public sphere when he drew attention to bourgeois privatization of the public sphere through the ownership of media with the typical the example of Silvio Berlusconi of Italy, who used his media power for political self-promotion and support of dubious legislation. He also changed the media culture of his country from a dominance of political education to an emphasis on the marketing of depoliticized entertainment. In a similar vein, the public sphere of policy contribution and debate was a victim of ruling group monopoly. But new forces that support the recovery of that public sphere emerged in the forms of technology of the new media and globalization. Thus, social media, one of the driving forces of Occupy and other social movements infused impetus to sociopolitical struggles by providing discursive avenues that are not quite amenable to easy coercion, privatization, and projection of state force.

End SARS Protests

#End SARS movement began on Twitter in 2016 as a protest against police brutality, unleashed commonly by members of a special squad of the Nigerian police, Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). This unit of the Police was set up in 1992 to fight violent crimes. However, it degenerated to a terrorizing force against the citizens. Recent research on its activities between 2017 and 2020 reveal at least eighty-two cases of ill-treatment and extra-judicial killing. Indeed, since 2017, a particularly gruesome attack by the same police squad has led to online agitations that demanded a scrapping of the unit.³⁰ Often, these calls are discountenanced by the government. At other times it claims to have overhauled the unit, while rights violations have continued. The End SARS movement gained unusual momentum when on October 3, 2020, a video was shared on Twitter showing SARS officials killing a man and fleeing with his vehicle in Delta State, Nigeria.³¹ This event marked the transition of the virtual protests and criticism of the SARS police unit to a fully blown physical demonstration across different parts of the country. Following the gruesome killing by SARS, eight celebrities called for a peaceful march in Lagos state. The peaceful demonstration was quick to spread to other parts of the country. In the face of a widening national protest with potential for a total breakdown of order, the Inspector General of Police disbanded the SARS unit of the Police on October 11, 2020. The protests persisted, apparently because the same unit had been banned four previous times. So, the last dissolution was taken for a well-worn official path of political chicanery.

³⁰ Medinat Abdulazeez Malefakis, "Using Social Media and #ENDSARS to Dismantle Nigeria's Hierarchical Gerontocracy," *Global Outlook* (January 29, 2021), <https://toda.org/global-outlook/using-social-media-and-endsars-to-dismantle-nigerias-hierarchical-gerontocracy.html> (accessed November 27, 2022).

³¹ Vincent Obia, "#EndSARS, a Unique Twittersphere and Social Media Regulation in Nigeria."

The protesters made five major demands from the government including: one, immediate release of all arrested protesters; two, justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families; three, setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of police misconduct; four, psychological evaluation and retraining (to be confirmed by an independent body) of all disbanded SARS officers before they can be redeployed; and five, an increase in police salary so that they are adequately compensated for protecting the lives of citizens.³²

The spread and persistence of the protest was a major concern to the government. Across the entire country, several protesters were killed, but the one that stood out was the shooting of at least twelve of the several unarmed protesters who were camped at the Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos on October 20, 2020, when soldiers opened fire on them.³³ This particular incident dispersed the protesters and brought the agitation to an abrupt end.

In all, what stood out about the protest is that it was organized mostly by the youth, especially between the ages of fifteen to thirty-five who happened to be the predominant victims of the SARS unit. Reports were common of young victims of SARS brutality who were subjected to torture for either driving expensive cars, having tattoo marks, dying their hair with unusual colors, and for use of expensive phones. These factors were some of the grounds for arrest and heavy extortion of young victims by the police unit.³⁴ So, it is not surprising that End SARS protests were driven by the youth with the instrumentality of digital technology, which is the main dynamic of the new public sphere. Digital technology is one arena in which youth are more savvy, and it has in fact been actively deployed in both End SARS and similar recent political engagements.

In the #End SARS protest, the movement made the highest deployment of social media for the organization of the protest, in fact in a manner similar to the Tahir Square Protest in Egypt during the Arab Spring. Precisely, Twitter was used at least in three ways: to coordinate protests; to amplify the voice of the campaign globally; and to express critical narratives about businesses and celebrities considered not to lend active voices to the protest or movement. In terms of organizing the demonstration, Twitter was used to share information about protest venues, send information about most recent development and news as well as spread *esprit de corp* among participants in the movement. Centrally, Twitter has emerged as an important space of oppositional discourse

³² Vanguard, "Five Demands From #End SARS Protesters," *Vanguard* (October 12, 2020), <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/10/five-demands-from-endsars-protesters/> (accessed January 9, 2021).

³³ Amnesty International, "Nigeria: Killing of #EndSARS Protesters by the Military Must be Investigated," Oct. 21, 2020, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/10/killing-of-endsars-protesters-by-the-military-must-be-investigated/> (accessed January 7, 2021).

³⁴ Medinat A. Malefakis, "Using Social Media and #ENDSARS to Dismantle Nigeria's Hierarchical Gerontocracy."

in Nigeria.³⁵ Apart from Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and other social media spaces have played the same role and have in the recent history of Nigeria often conditioned the cadence of public discourses and politics. This is possible due to virtual engagement that could more or less be seen as an emerging culture that expresses public sentiments on governance. Generally, dissent is typical of this emerging culture.

New Media, Culture of Dissent and Democracy Nexus

The new media is said to have created a land whose inhabitants are not subject to anyone's control and have power to denigrate anyone in what is called "dissing." Use of abusive language is common in the Nigerian social media space, not minding whom they refer to. Such contumely would have been denied publication in the conventional media or censored due to abusive content. Twitter users in Nigeria, called Nigerian *Twitterati*, are considered militant in their engagement as they not only denigrate state officials, but also fellow activists or some celebrities who refuse to join in amplifying the voices of protest.³⁶ This combative posture tends to align with the character of Nigeria's activism in the colonial days, such as in 1908 when Herbert Macaulay used both the press and pamphlets to criticize Walter Egerton, the governor of Southern Nigeria. Also between 1862 and 1913, James Davies of the *Nigerian Times*, John Jackson of *Lagos Weekly Times*, Sapara Williams of *Lagos Weekly Record* and E. D. Morel of the *African Mail* used the platform of the press to fight against undemocratic colonial laws, racial segregation, land alienation, and taxes among several other authoritarian practices. In later years, the West African Pilot Newspaper became a trademark combatant journalistic outfit against colonial rule in Nigeria. The succeeding postcolonial days also saw the Nigerian press divided into pro-establishment and anti-establishment journalism, but with the critical wing of the press being very audacious and vocal. This was the case during the military rule when news outfits like *Newswatch* magazine, *Tell* magazine, *The News*, *Tempo* among several others were both bold and critical. It would seem that the militant culture of social media and its audaciousness is a holdover of the behaviour of the colonial print media.³⁷

The new public sphere in Nigeria also thrives on the culture of trial by public opinion. The power of opinion moulding, which was a major task of the press, is now a shared responsibility with the new media. The presence of social network subscribers in remote communities is not only a source to enrich regular news for both the print and electronic media, but also a source

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Bernard Nwosu, *Civil Society and Democracy in Nigeria: a Theoretical Approach* (London: Routledge, 2021).

to provide materials for public comments and debates about both private concerns of individuals as well as matters that relate to the state. With social media interventions in news materials, public judgments on various news issues are common. In many instances, matters that may be subject to judicial and/or administrative processes are either apriori or simultaneously subject to public judgment. Thus, the new public sphere with its expansiveness, has strengthened public opinion as a major force in determining socio-political outcomes.

The virtual public sphere easily pulls together the local and the global audiences. This happens in two different ways. The first is the easy coordination among internet savvy activists based locally within Nigeria for physical protests when it is convenient, as were the cases of Occupy Nigeria and #End SARS. At the same time, Nigerians living overseas easily participate in the debates and in some occasions actively protest in the various embassies of Nigeria in their countries of residence in solidarity with local protesters. Similarly, the practice of social media exposure of governance failures and rights abuses projects the problems to global visibility and scrutiny. During the #End SARS protests, it was actually a strategic action on the part of the protesters to constantly ensure that their protests had international visibility in a way that would embarrass the government and attract international political attention and possibly actions that may stretch to political sanctions. For instance, online signatures raised by different groups became a basis for a debate on the subject by the British Parliament.³⁸ Besides, international organizations like the United Nations, European Union, and African Union, and international rights groups like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Plan International, among several others had lent critical voices to the use of force against peaceful protesters by the Nigerian Government. Part of the political consequences of such actions may include bilateral and/or multilateral sanctions, and it is by connecting the global with the local that such outcomes may be possible.

Overall, an expressive, critical and assertive citizenship is important for the growth of democracy and the new public sphere, with the culture of actors within its Nigerian space appearing to provide promises about such a pathway.

Amplified Voices and Democratic Rights

The frequency with which people appear on the public sphere to engage matters of democratic rights has quantitatively increased. This increase correlates with the rising internet penetration and expansion of social media usage. With access to the internet, more people are likely to join virtual contexts of public debates and activities. This invariably extends to issues that affect the

³⁸ Paul Omorogbe, “#End SARS as British Government Hears Petition,” *Nigerian Tribune* (November 23, 2020), <https://tribuneonline.ng/endsars-as-british-parliament-hears-petition-uk-govt-says-it-wont-speculate-on-sanctions/> (accessed December 29, 2020).

government. In 1999 when internet penetration in Nigeria was 0.04 percent³⁹ the media of the press and the old public sphere was predominant. By 2009, it was 9.30 percent.⁴⁰ Ten years down the line in 2019, internet usage rose to 33.60 percent.⁴¹ The period between 1999 and 2010 is important for some new developments in the ICT. During that period, the social media that provides context for the new public sphere made major progress. Facebook was founded in 2004. Youtube and Twitter were created in 2005 and 2006, respectively. WhatsApp was launched in 2009, while Instagram entered the market in 2010. These internet-driven platforms were complemented by the continuous improvement of the technology of the android mobile phone, which first came out in 2008. Together, these technological factors created the windows through which private ideas accessed the virtual public sphere that emerged with and are supported by these technologies. Thus, internet usage in Nigeria's total population of about 206 million, grew from 85.49 million to 104.4 million users between January 2020 and January 2021. Thus in October 2020 when the End SARS protest took place, internet usage would have ranged between 90 and 100 million.

As global internet penetration expands, the usage of these technologies of public engagement is equally diffuse. In places with low internet density like Nigeria, the growth of social media use and activism have also corresponded with the growth of internet penetration. For instance, by the end of 2004, Facebook barely had more than one million registered users, but by the end of 2020, Facebook active monthly users had grown by 2.8 billion.⁴² In 2012, out of 170,123,740 Nigerians, 5,860,240 used Facebook.⁴³ This perhaps explains why Facebook was the most used social media of engagement during the 2012 Occupy Nigeria protest.

By the end of the third quarter of 2021, there were roughly 28 million social media users in Nigeria. The top ten most widely used social media and the size of their users as of the third quarter of 2021 include: WhatsApp 91.9%; Facebook 86.4%; Instagram 77.9%; Facebook Messenger 71.2%; Twitter

³⁹ The GlobalEconomy.com, "Internet Users-Country Rankings 1999," *Internet users by country, around the world*, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/internet_users/ (accessed, June 25, 2022).

⁴⁰ The GlobalEconomy.com, "Internet Users-Country Rankings 2009," *Internet users by country, around the world*, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/internet_users/ (accessed, June 25, 2022).

⁴¹ The Global Economy.com, "Internet Users-Country Rankings, 2019," *Internet users by country, around the world*, https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/rankings/internet_users/ (accessed 25, 2022).

⁴² Felix Richter, "Facebook Keeps on Growing," *Statista* (February 4, 2021), <https://www.statista.com/chart/10047/facebooks-monthly-active-users/> (accessed, January 7, 2021).

⁴³ Helen N. Eke, Charles Obiora Omekwu, and Jennifer Nneka Odoh, "The Use of Social Networking Sites Among Undergraduate Students at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka," *Library Philosophy and Practice* (2014), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/188094221.pdf> (accessed, December 29, 2020).

57.4%; Telegram 50.3%; LinkedIn 37.6%; Tik Tok 47.7%; and Snapchat 49.7%.⁴⁴ The above is a mere slight shift from the statistic of 2020, when the End SARS protest happened. Also drawing from the above statistics, it is plausible to link internet availability and access to social media with increasing public conversation and growth of awareness about governance issues in Nigeria. Since such platforms are free from over-regulation and censorship common with the conventional media, it easily serves the purposes of (dis)information dissemination and mobilization for resistance against harsh government policies and unbearable projection of state coercion, as in the respective cases of Occupy Nigeria and End SARS protests.

In relating the increasing internet penetration and social media usage to democratization in Nigeria, this paper looks at a broad picture of democracy indicators from the Freedom House database from 1999 to 2020 in order to see what has changed in light of changes in the new public sphere. In the first sixteen years of restoration of elective rule in Nigeria, her Freedom House average scores on civil liberty stands at an average of 4.4 on a scale of 1 to 7, where 7 is the worst score while 1 is the best. Over the same period, her average score for political rights is 4.3 on the same evaluation scale. From 2016 to 2020 when Freedom House began to measure internet freedom status, Nigeria scored an average of 16 on obstacles to internet access, on a scale of 0 to 25. In terms of the measure of limits on internet content, Nigeria's score is 24.6 on a scale of 0 to 35, while the average score for violations of user rights is 21.2 on a scale of 0 to 40. The country's overall classification by Freedom House over the 21-year period (1999-2020) is "partly free." In terms of these scores, there has hardly been any significant shifts on the entire measures of democratization. This would suggest that the phenomenal growth of internet penetration and social media usage while expanding the new public sphere, is not touching off corresponding changes in democratization in the country.

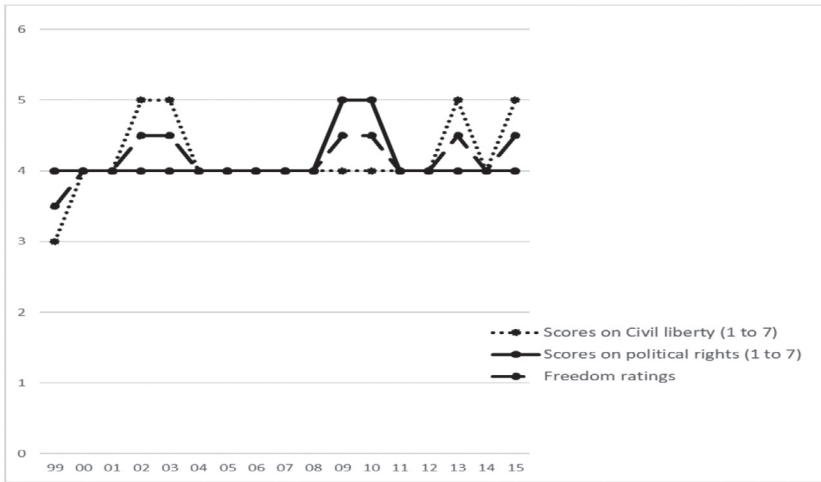
Examining Issues of Social Rights

The social rights are measured with proxies that relate to the suggestion of Marshall⁴⁵ that citizens should be entitled to the support of the state to enjoy the basic minimum conditions of civilized life within the capacity of the government. The proxies that relate to Marshall's argument are ones that relate mostly to the basic aspects of human development. These aspects lie mostly in the realm of governance, and the United National Development Programme measures the crucial aspects of human development which this work adopts as constituting social rights but calls them Human Development Indicators

⁴⁴ Statista, "Most Used Social Media Platforms in Nigeria as of the Third Quarter of 2021," *Social Media & User-Generated Content*, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1176101/leading-social-media-platforms-nigeria/> (accessed January 27, 2022).

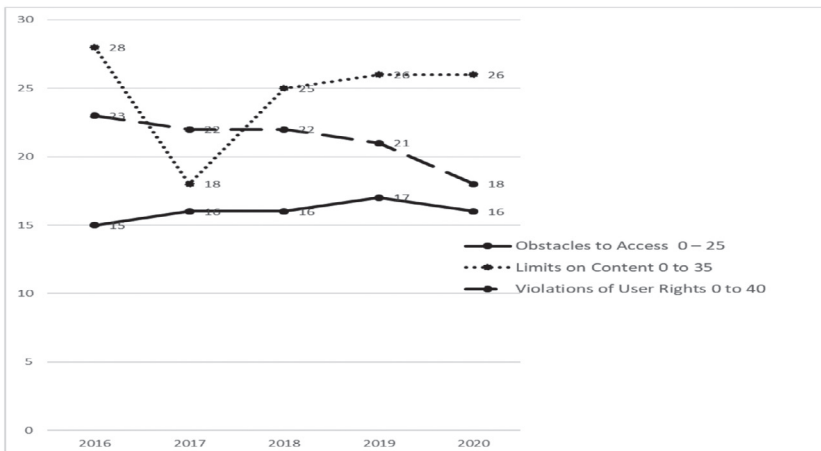
⁴⁵ Thomas H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Classes*.

Figure 1. Freedom House Democracy Scores 1999-2015



Source: Author (from Freedom House Data base).

Figure 2. Freedom House Measures of Internet Freedom Status 2016 to 2020



Source: Author, from Freedom House Database.

Figure 3. Nigeria's Human Development Index (HDI), 1999-2019

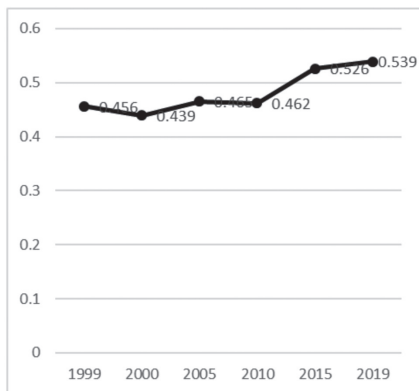
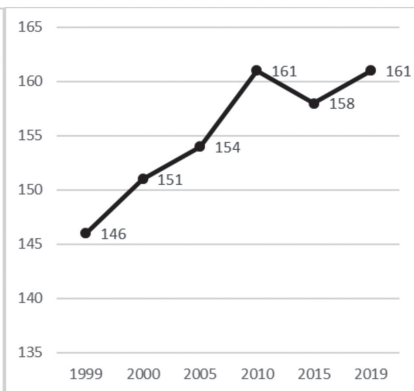


Figure 4. Nigeria's Ranking in Human Development Index (HDI), 1999-2019.



Source: Author's compilation from UNDP Reports. Source: Author's compilation from UNDP Reports.

(HDI). The HDI is a summary of the composite measure of a country's average achievement in the three basic aspects of human development, including health, knowledge, and standard of living.

It is important to note that Human Development Indicators may as well have high scores under a dictatorship. It does not make such a government democratic. A government is only democratic when it commits to political, civil, and social rights and on the basis of fulfilling these commitments also achieves significant progress on human development, depending on the resources available to political leadership. This particular index of measuring democracy is one that scholars are too often uncomfortable to use because it may not always be easy to determine resources available to a government and how much it should achieve with such. Thus, governance is usually treated separately. Nonetheless, since the end state of democracy envisions progress in social rights, it should inevitably feature in democratization discourses.

Beyond the Freedom House Scores

The Freedom House Measures had been criticized by Gianone⁴⁶ for its neo-conservative bent and ideological focus. Centrally, it is charged for obscuring socio-economic rights and partly illuminating political and civil rights in a

⁴⁶ Diego Gianone, "Political and Ideological Aspects in the Measurement of Democracy: the Freedom House Case," *Democratization* 18, no. 1 (2010): 68-97.

manner that aligns with neoliberalism. While these criticisms are useful in their own right, this study had noted that socio-economic rights would be a consideration in a future study so that the present paper could give sufficient stress to civil and political rights. Thus the analysis here builds on Freedom House measures but equally looks at specific individual events.

It is needful to note that Freedom House measures only provide a general picture of trends in civil and political rights. Its approach is usually too general to give a clear picture regarding experiences of note which deserve attention as important markers of democratic progress or setback. For instance, it should be reckoned as an important step forward for democracy that the new public sphere has openings for a large number of citizens to comment on public policy matters and strategize on responses including protests and demand accountable behavior from the government. The rising areas of such activism range from issues of human rights to matters affecting economic lives of the people. Although these issues had been fought in the past before the virtual public sphere became an important center of political action in Nigeria, participation in the old public sphere was rather too limited and elitist. The new public sphere compared to the old, tends to represent a more robust sphere of idea-sharing.

Drawing from the dialectic principle of transformation from quantity to quality, internet penetration and its high density of citizen presence have recently been shown to lead to revolutions in the Arab world. The Occupy movement in Nigeria and End SARS protests are major leaps from collective action problems, which are common in Nigeria. Indeed, the End SARS protest was well organized, attracted many young people, celebrities, and popular artists to sustain the popular demand to end police brutality. Above all, The ICT that supported the protest exuded such sophistication to the point that no one individual or group was identified to be the organizer of the protest. Besides, it was one singular event in which crowd funding was generated to support protesters.⁴⁷ If not accounted for in detail, such developments are diminished in their value addition to the expansion of the democratic space.

By putting specific experiences in perspective, the impact of the new public sphere and the culture it throws up about citizen dissent is better accounted for. But it does not efface the correctness of the holistic picture of trends in civil and political rights, which Freedom House data shows. We know for instance, that the End SARS protest ended in a brutal killing of protesters by the state. Secondly, organizations that raised funds in support of victims of SARS and the protest itself suffered punitive financial measures by the government, which directed the blocking of their accounts and the imposition of fines on such organizations. Also, three independent television stations which reported

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria: Punitive financial moves against protesters," *Human Rights Watch* (November 13, 2020), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/13/nigeria-punitive-financial-moves-against-protesters> (accessed January, 3 2021).

the protests by sharing footage from social media about the protest were fined for amounts that ranged between \$5200 to \$7800 by government regulators for purportedly sharing “unverified” content that escalated the protests.⁴⁸ Over all, the Occupy Nigeria and End SARS protests are significant, but they are not generating corresponding significant changes in state institutions for the support of civil rights, political liberties, and governance for human development. Some factors account for this. But the most likely reason for the persistence of inertia in the progress of democracy is that the mostly young internet activists focus more energy on combative online discourses and occasional protests but hardly mobilize for more practical steps for political change like organizing to vote massively against authoritarian regimes or even to form a political party (see Table 1 on voter turnout in eight electoral cycles - from 1979 to 2019). Based on the statistics on the table, there is a general poor voter turnout in a population whose demographics indicate that since 2010, the age group 15 to 64 years constitutes over 63 percent of the population. The voting population lies in this bracket beginning from 18 years. But they hardly accord value to the ballot due to doubts about the integrity of the electoral process. It is also not common for the Nigerian social media activist groups to articulate clear social projects and take steps to actualize them politically. Nonetheless, there is a recent move towards robust mobilization of the youths for the 2023 ballots. The social media activism in this regard is quite dynamic, and between June 2021 and June 2022, 6.8 million new voters have been registered. 69.7

Table 1. Voter Turnout in Eight Electoral Cycles in Nigerian Presidential Elections (1979-2019)

Year	Voter Turnout	Total Vote	Registration	VAP Turnout	Voting Age Population (VAP)	Population	Invalid Votes
2019	34.75%	28,614,190	82,344,107	26.87%	106,490,312	208,679,114	4.51%
2015	43.65%	29,432,083	67,422,005	32.11%	91,669,312	181,562,056	2.87%
2011	53.68%	39,469,484	73,528,040	48.32%	81,691,751	155,215,573	3.19%
2007	57.49%	35,397,517	61,567,036	49.85%	71,004,507	131,859,731	
2003	69.08%	42,018,735	60,823,022	65.33%	64,219,246	129,434,911	6.00%
1999	52.26%	30,280,052	57,938,945	57.36%	52,792,781	108,258,359	1.40%
1983	NA	14,039,486	NA	27.79%	50,526,720	105,264,000	
1979	35.25%	17,098,27	48,499,091	44.83%	38,142,090	77,841,000	2.00%

Source: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2022).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), “Nigeria: Voter Turnout by Election Type-Presidential,” *Voter Turnout Database* (2022), <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/231/40> (accessed March 27, 2022).

percent of the new registrants are youths, according to the national election management body.⁵⁰ However, the social media is still at the level of being a potential force for political change. Its effectiveness can only be evaluated if the trend in election turnout as shown below is altered by a substantial rise in voting in subsequent elections.

Conclusion

Beginning from the theoretical premise of Jurgen Habermas, this paper discussed the public sphere and the processes that happen within it. Ideally, it is a discursive sphere characterized by free speech and an ethos of civility. This ideal form of the sphere was the basis of Habermas' idea. But the actually existing public sphere reveals dynamics that are more than civil, more than articulations of freedom, and bear the face of a Janus regarding promotion of democratic freedom. The new public sphere, while reflecting the character of the actually existing one, is equally characterized by the expansion of access to the space with the support of ICT. Also, the new public sphere and its social media have vastly tempered the bourgeois or elite capture of the space. As many persons as have internet access and a subscription to social media can join public issue conversations and respond to calls for actions from the same source.

Progress in ICT has expanded internet penetration and usage all over the world, including Nigeria. It has equally widened access to social media and social software, which are the main agencies of the new public sphere. The relative freedom of social media from strictures of state regulation that constrain the old public sphere as well as its ability to reach a global audience within minutes at very minimal costs confer an advantage to the new public sphere. By this advantage, it is creating an impetus for free speech, increased public awareness, and engagement with state policies. The new public sphere in Nigeria is on this note found to have evolved a culture of audaciousness and militant activism, and statistics show an increasing trend in this regard.

Despite the expansion of the new public sphere and its audaciousness in Nigeria, the analysis of this paper found no corresponding growth of civil and political rights that support democratization. Based on Freedom House data base, Nigeria's standing since the restoration of elective rule in 1999 is classified as partly free with no significant shift in any of the scores. Besides, events that mass protest like the Occupy Nigeria Protests and End SARS have not made the state institutions to respond more to popular aspirations. Instead, there was a partial concession in the case of the Occupy Nigeria protest in

⁵⁰ Tunde Adebayo, "Newly Registered Voters Mostly Students, Housewives," *Punch* (June 4, 2022), <https://punchng.com/newly-registered-voters-mostly-students-housewives-says-inec/> (accessed June 8, 2022).

order to buy a cold peace, but a severe brutality on the End SARS protesters to further restrict the civic and democratic space. Ultimately, Nigeria has institutions of elective rule, but such institutions require more fundamental orientation towards democratic behavior.