

# SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE

Bartholomew Nnaemedo  
 Department of Religious Studies/Philosophy  
 Abia State University, Uturu.  
 nnaemedobartholomew@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Social media are one of the trending phenomena in the contemporary era. They have reduced the world no longer to a global village but instead as the "world in my palm." What makes this species of media more fascinating is not only their ability to disseminate information, connect people, and maintain social relationships. Mainly, the thrust of their overwhelming influence in the contemporary era lies in their interactivity. It implies that social media are capable of user-generated content. This potential, in turn, makes social media fluidic, and so, subject to both positive and negative use. Thus, this paper sets out to ascertain whether social media can still replicate the above constructive roles in the realm of philosophy amidst the abuse of the platforms. Primarily, this paper assesses the actual value social media have for the contemporary philosophical debates against the backdrop of the similarity between social media and agora/ōbí. Then, using social media as a contemporary agora/ōbí, this paper deliberates how social media can promote the current debates in philosophy, champion public philosophy, and salvage the ailing image of philosophy. However, the paper, categorically, maintained that the concept of public philosophy in this consideration does not imply philosophical discourse that does not respect the disciplinary borders of philosophy. Instead, the emphasis is on making philosophy more practical and goal-oriented. Thus, public philosophy does not substitute academic philosophy. It only complements it.*

**Keywords:** *Social media, Agora/ōbí, Contemporary debate, Public philosophy, interactivity.*

## Introduction

It is not debatable that social media are trending phenomena in contemporary society. The dominance of this media system is such that today one can adequately describe the world not just as a global village (McLuhan 1962, p.31 & 1964, p.93), but preferably as "a world in my palm." With social media information is not just accessible to the users of the media; they equally participate in generating the content. Such is the case thanks to the user-generated-content potentials of social media. The user-generated-content capability of social media, in turn, makes the media fluidic. Thus, users of social media can generate both positive and harmful content through them. For instance, the users can use them to enhance their social interactions (Mehmood & Taswir, 2013; Helou & Ab.Rahim, 2014), advance their academic and economic performance, engage in academic research, improve patient-doctor relationship (Akram, 2017, pp.349-353), and for entertainment purposes (Amadi & Jabe, 2018, p.7). In contrast, their usage can result in cybercrimes, cyberbullying, internet addiction, poor academic performance, moral decadence through pornography, invasion of

people's privacy, and impersonalizing/weakening of family relationships (Baruah, 2012, p.9). Thus, given the fluidity of social media, it is crucial to inquire how such a system can benefit philosophy in contemporary philosophical debates. It is evident that the philosophical debates trending in this epoch, especially in Nigeria, range from issues bordering on gender inequality, restructuring, call for self-determination, terrorism, and ethical issues such as determination of the legality of homosexuality and abortion, to name but a few.

This paper, therefore, sets out to investigate the exact role of social media in the above ongoing debates. It undertakes the investigation cognizance of the avowed aims and objectives of philosophy. As a discipline, philosophy is a critical, rational, and reflective inquiry into the issues that confront humans in their environment. It carries out these investigations to offer responses that would help humans tackle their various life challenges. No matter the approach or method it adopts in confronting these issues, the goal remains the same. So, to do justice to this paper, it is vital to do a conceptual analysis of social media, x-ray the different types of social media, and indicate the place of social media in philosophy.

### Meaning of social media

The phrase social media is from two Latin words, *socialis internuntius*. The term *socialis* stands for allies, confederate, and conjugal, while *internuntius* signifies messenger, mediator, or "a go-between" (Gerald, Genevieve, Joyce & Littlejohn, 2008, pp.327&187). Hence, etymologically, social media means a mediator between allies. It is a type of media that offer a common link between friends. However, this literal understanding of the term does not indicate the originator of the information which social media disseminate. So, it is significant to undertake an academic definition of the phrase. Notably, scholars have approached the phrase from diverse perspectives: diversity based on the conceptual features of social media and the disciplinary peculiarities of the scholars. This paper notes four of such disciplinary-based definitions, namely: definitions based on sociality (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Trottier & Fuchs, 2015; Miller et al., 2016), conceptions based on connectivity (Bryer & Zavatarro, 2011; Baruah, 2012; Ezeah et al., 2013; Manning, 2014; Manikandan, 2017), technocratic view of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61), and functional understanding of social media (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011, pp.241-251).

For the scholars who defined social media along sociality, social media are species of media that improve social interactions among people. It was in this context that Miller et al., (2016) defined social media as "...the colonisation of the space between traditional broadcast and private dyadic communication, providing people with a scale of group size and degrees of privacy that we have termed scalable sociality" (p.9). Likewise, Trottier & Fuchs (2015) described all computing systems, web applications, and all species of media as social since they accumulate and disseminate human knowledge, which is a product of social relations. On the contrary, they maintained that "...not all computing systems and web applications support direct communication between humans, in which at least two humans mutually exchange symbols that are interpreted as being meaningful" (p.5). What this implies is that social media are both informative and communication conduit. Further, they identified three forms of sociality, such as cognition, communication, and cooperation. They argued that for an online platform to qualify as social media, it should be able to support any of the forms of sociality above.

On their part, scholars who tilted towards connectivity conceived social media from the pedestal of social interactions. Thus, Bryer & Zavatarro (2011) defined social media as "... technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberations across stakeholders" (p.327). Likewise, Baruah (2012) conceived this form of media as "...the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue" (p.1). At the same time, Manning (2014) described social media as "...the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation" (p.1158). Similarly, Manikandan (2017) viewed this species of media as "...the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration" (p.9). From Manikandan's paper, it is deducible that this form of media is "...the integration of digital media including combinations of electronic texts, graphics, moving images and sound into a structured computerized environment that allows people to interact with the data for appropriate purposes" (Manikandan, 2017, p.9). Social media enhance social communication and enable discussions among their participants" (Ippili, 2017, p.788).

In a related development, Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) defined social media from the technocratic aperture as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (p.61). According to them, Web 2.0 can stand for the ideological and technological foundation of the media, while User Generated Content (UGC) represents the summation of the sundry ways people utilize social media (p.61).

The functional view of social media is another aspect that warrants some details in this paper. Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre (2011) gave a vivid picture of this approach to social media. They considered what they called the seven fundamental or functional blocks in social media, namely: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation, and groups (pp.241-251). The functional blocks are essential templates for understanding and evaluating social media activities. They are, as it were, the primary constituents of social media.

All said and done, none of the definitions above adequately expressed the meaning of social media. Hence, this paper adopts a holistic or inclusive view of social media. Following this integrative approach, this paper defines social media as online applications which possess potentials for User Generated Content and could enhance diverse social interactions and communications. Subsequently, that social media are online applications means that they are internet-mediated applications. Hence, it is apt to assert: no internet, no social media. Also, that social media have potentials for user-generated-content shows that they allow interactivity. It implies that they enable their users to create and generate the content of the media. Invariably, that informs the flexibility of social media. That, too, makes social media devoid of ethical value. Subsequently, the usage of social media defines their ethical status. Finally, that social media enhance social interactions, and communication shows that they do not only have potentials for user-generated content. Their users employ them in their daily discussions and interactions. Therefore, social media are not mere inert internet-based applications. Instead, they are functional online applications.

## Types of social media

There is no generally accepted way of categorizing social media. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) identified six classes of social media. However, Baruah (2012) reduced them to four, namely: social networking sites, blog, content-generating sites, sharing sites, and user appraisal sites (p.4). On the other hand, Anjugu (2013) grouped them into five classes: social bookmarking, social news, social networking, social photos, and video sharing, and wikis. This paper, however, adopted the view of Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), and it comprises collaborative projects, blogs and microblogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds (p.62).

For Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), collaborative projects enable their users to undertake "...joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users and are, in this sense, probably the most democratic manifestation of UGC (User Generated Content)" (p.62). Examples of collaborative projects are online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, to name but a few. The significant advantage of collaborative projects is their ability to ensure better content generation as a result of the joint effort of their users. Another kind of social media is the blog. "They are the social media equivalent of personal web pages" (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p.63). A blog can assume the form of a personal diary. Some examples of a blog are San Francisco-based Justin.tv, Linda Ikeji blog, and the rest. In a related development, content communities are another kind of social media. Their first end is "sharing media content between users" (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p.63). They do not entail a personal profile. Book Crossing, Flickr, YouTube, Slide share, picasaweb.google.com, docstoc.com, and others are instances of content communities. In contrast, to operate social networking sites, the users create profiles that contain personal information about them. The information enables them to invite other users into social networking sites. Some instances of this species of social media are Facebook, WhatsApp, My Space, Twitter, Instagram, Forums such as Nairaland.com and Quora, and the rest.

At the same time, the last classification of social media falls under virtual worlds. Mostly they "...are platforms that replicate a three-dimensional environment in which users can appear in the form of personalized avatars and interact with each other as they would in real life" (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p.64). Thus, they are perhaps the ultimate manifestation of social media since they offer the highest level of social presence and media richness when compared with the rest of the applications discussed above (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p.64). The two types of virtual worlds are virtual game worlds and virtual social worlds. The former "...require their users to behave according to strict rules in the context of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game" (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010, p.64). Their basic examples are cod-medieval "World of Warcraft and Sony's Ever Quest. In contrast, interactions in the virtual social worlds do not enjoy regulation by strict rules. The users freely choose their behaviours and fundamentally live a virtual life analogous to their real life. However, Second Life application is a typical example of virtual social worlds.

## The roles of social media in the contemporary philosophical debates

### Informative role

One of the outstanding characteristics of human beings is their ability to communicate with others. Humans communicate through various means: verbal and non-verbal, consciously, and unconsciously. Buttressing these modes of communication, Heidegger (1973) noted that humans speak. He said that humans speak both when they are awake and when they are in dreams. Further, Heidegger asserted that humans are always speaking, even when they do not say a single word aloud, but merely listen or read. Besides, he stated that humans speak even when they are not explicitly listening or speaking but are attending to some work or having a rest. So, for Heidegger, human beings are mostly speaking in one form or another. They speak as speaking is natural to them. It does not first arise out of some particular volition. Humans naturally possess language (27). It shows that humans are symbolic beings. Mondin (1991) lent credence to this when he states: "man is an intersubjective being, a being of dialogue, and not a monad, an island, separated from the rest of the world; but he is instead an open being who realizes himself in communication with others" (p.137). Ipso facto, communication is necessary for the mutual co-existence of human beings. No meaningful achievement is possible without communication. Of course, without proper communication, human relationships would certainly experience another Tower of Babel episode (Genesis 6).

Admittedly, it is possible to reinforce human communicative ability through contemporary means of communication. Interestingly, social media constitute a part of these contemporary devices. With these present-day communication mechanisms, contemporary philosophical debates are bound to receive significant boosts. For instance, through social media, information concerning various philosophical debates can reach diverse philosophical groups. It comprises information about the venue and time of the event. Also, the philosophical communities receive updates about the pre-debate events such as the direction to the venue, the financial requirements, the theme and subthemes of the debate, the participants, and the rest. With social media, the organizers can send bulk messages to the participants simultaneously, efficiently, very fast, and at a cheap cost.

Besides, social media platforms such as Nairaland and Quora give participants the forum for expressing their views on the theme of incoming philosophical debates. Subsequently, these views could benefit both the participants and the organizers of the debate. On one side, the views could enable individual participants to appreciate the theme of the debate better and enhance their participation accordingly. Correspondingly, the views could also expose to the organizers of the debate, the aspects of the programme that require improvement. By extension, the views can also help to educate non-participants to the debate who may have access to the platform. In this way, social media can extend the philosophical debate beyond the confine of the target community and, thus, make philosophy more beneficial to society.

### **Connectivity role**

Social media are not merely mechanisms for the dissemination of information. As well, they help to connect people and thereby enhance the maintenance of social relationships. Merely passing information to participants may not help philosophical debate so much as when the organizers are connected to the participants. Such deeper organizers-participants connection does not only help to achieve the etymological meaning of

communication as *communicatio* (an imparting, communicating), *communicare* (to share, inform), and *communis* - share together (Smith, 1962, p.128). As well, it does not merely rely on the functional approach to communication, namely: "definitions that accentuate sharing, those that border on intentional influence, and the ones that are inclusive in nature" (Nnaemedo, 2018, p.114). With the emphasis on sharing, communication is "a process of sharing or exchange of ideas, information, knowledge, attitude or feeling among two or more persons through certain signs and symbols" (Hasan, 2016, p.3). However, this definition does not indicate feedback. It only conceives communication from a sender-receiver perspective. No mention of the intentional aspect. As a corrective of such a gap, one can conceive communication in terms of influencing behaviours. Still, the intentional approach does not exhaust all that communication stands for. So, a holistic or inclusive functional approach remains the optimal option. Following such approach, this paper defines communication as a conscious/unconscious process of sharing of information between a sender and a receiver, to share information, influence behaviour, or just as a manifestation of the intrinsic nature of human beings as animals that communicate (Nnaemedo, 2018, p.116).

One of the mechanisms of achieving this holistic concept of communication is through social media. In contemporary society, social media are, unarguably, the most trending means of mass communication. Their relevance is evident in all aspects of human engagements. In education, their influence is enormous, both positive and negative. Subsequently, their influence is not limited to any aspect of academics. It permeates all the spheres of education. As a result, information from social media can further subsequent philosophical debates. A case in point is the bulk Short Message Service (SMS) containing the email addresses of the participants. It could be of help to others who may organize such debate in the future. Of course, it constitutes a database for reaching future participants in philosophical debates. Likewise, the database provides a categorization of the participants according to their areas of interest and views. Such provision gives the organizers of future philosophical debates ample opportunity of choosing specific participants for specialized debates. On the above premise, it is not superfluous to assert that social media make "social communication easy and enable discussions among its participants" (Ippili, 2017, p.788). Therefore, without a strong communication base, a philosophical debate could turn out to be a well-conceived and documented philosophical programme devoid of concrete expression, ipso facto, a mere *fictio mentis* (mental image).

### **Contemporary agora**

The term *agora* is not new in philosophy. It dates back to the ancient Greek epoch. In that era, it was a term used for an assembly, a meeting/gathering place. It was usually situated in the centre of the city and became the hub of the public life of ancient Greece. Later, the term *agora* was used to designate a market place or an arena for commercial activities. So, the term *agora* served dual functions: political and commercial. Perhaps, this could be the reason why Liddell, Scott, Jones & McKenzie (1843) identified two verbal forms of the term, namely: *agoreúō*, (I speak in public) and *agorázō*, (I shop). Likewise, Donati, (2015) stressing the dual purposes served by *agora* observed that it was a point of convergence for major roads of the city-state as well as a distribution centre "in the constant movement of people, money, goods, and ideas" (p.177). Thus, people go to *agora* for political purposes and to shop for things. It implies that in the *agora*, the citizens of the Greek city-state interacted with their

colleagues and friends and as well as engage in business transactions. Besides, it was a place for informal intellectual brainstorming, which results in the generation of new ideas (such as democracy). Eminent ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Hippocrates, and others, undertook their philosophy in the *agora*. For instance, Cooper, in his introduction to Euthyphro, noted that it took place in the *agora* or the market place of Athens (Cooper & Hutchinson, 1997, p.1).

Likewise, in African philosophy, the Igbo term that translates *agora* is what Nneato people of Umunniochi Local Government Area of Abia State call *ōbí*. Also, Isuochi people call it *okiriko*. Just like Greek *agora*, *ōbí* or *okiriko* is often located at a village square (*mbara*) or market square (*oma-ahia*). It can also be located at the centre of the compound of the eldest in a community where there is minimal interference from the inmates of the compound. Elders go there to make significant decisions about their village. They can also go there for rest and to exchange pleasantries with passersby as a way of fighting loneliness. In the *ōbí*, people have the opportunity to engage elders in a discussion. Anybody that desires to obtain specific information from the elderly can comfortably approach them in *ōbí*. Children freely gather at *ōbí* to engage each other in various social interactions whenever elders are not there for essential community meetings. Children may also gather at *ōbí* for *Or@Qa* visit aimed at spending one's time with some other persons). *ōbí* is the safest place for children to gather whenever their parents are away for farmwork. Besides, it is a forum for imparting community ethics on children through folk tales and riddles by the elders who often go there for rest during the day.

However, a comparative analysis of *agora* and social media reveals some areas of intersections and disjunctions. From the perspective of convergence, this paper identifies four areas. First, structurally, both *agora* and social media do not have one generally accepted definition. Just as there were different kinds of social media, there were varieties of *agora*. In ancient Greece, even though there was a general understanding of *agora* in terms of functionality, on the mechanical/structural level, there was no generally defined pattern of constructing *agora*. "Its spatial mechanics and social structure are never exactly replicated elsewhere. Ultimately this leads to the conclusion that there cannot be just one definition of the Greek *agora*, but many" (Donati, 2015, p.117). The same applies to the structural design of *ōbí*. In the same way, social media have different classifications, as already indicated above. Besides, each category has subsets. Each subset is differently designed to accommodate its specific objectives. Hence, each has potentials for the specific task it performs. These inbuilt mechanisms are the real determining factors of the various classes of each site.

Second, both social media and *agora* are social spaces available to all. For instance, the *agora* was a forum for all the citizens of the Greek city-state. Every person of reasonable age was free to participate in the numerous activities going on in the *agora*. Unlike the academic environment with its attendant strict rules and regulation regarding learning, *agora* does not have such hard and fast academic rules guiding it. Admittedly, that explains why Socrates could conduct his philosophical inquiry among the youths in the *agora*. Of course, he was accused of corrupting the young, an indication that what he taught differed from the orthodox teachings at the time. Similarly, each social media subset, offers users within the age limit of the sites, the opportunity to use their platforms. Like *agora*, social media are not

bound by strict rules as obtains in the case of traditional media. Before a piece of information gets to the end-user of traditional media, it must have passed through a series of gate-keeping operations. Perhaps, that accounts for the call in some quarters, especially in Nigeria, for anti-hate speech bill, as a way of moderating the activities of social media users, giving the fact that most perpetrators of hate speeches disseminate them through social media.

Third, both *agora* and social media promote social interaction. In the case of the *agora*, the open nature of the place makes social interaction very conducive. As a social space devoid of hard and fast rules and regulations, it was easy for people of various classes to undertake their various interactive sessions at *agora*. Engagement in interactivity was vivid in the Socratic Method of enquiry, where he identified his philosophical enterprise with that of an intellectual midwife. Through the dialogical method, he eventually succeeded in delivering his interlocutors of ignorance embedded in them, a feat impossible without his question and answer method guaranteed by the interactive environment of the *agora*. Likewise, social media have potentials for user-generated content. As contemporary interactive communication conduits, through social media, both organizers and participants can connect, "share ideas, experiences, pictures, messages and information of common interest" (Ezeah et al. 2013, p.23). As a result, social media enable them to play an active role in philosophical debates. For instance, the platforms ensure their active participation in the planning and preparation for philosophical debates. A fruitful debate requires the input of both organizers and the participants. Resultantly, these inputs can help improve the programme and make it more enticing and enriching. Consequently, such enhances the active organization and its corresponding active participation of the participants.

Fourth, both *agora* and social media provide the opportunity for disseminating information to a broad heterogeneous audience. For example, when a piece of information was communicated at *agora*, it went beyond the targeted audience to some others, not envisaged in the discussion. Thanks to the open nature of the environment and the fact that different kinds of people gather in the *agora*. In the same manner, when one uses social media platforms, the audience his/her message reaches are always heterogeneous. Also, in each case, the information gets across to the audience simultaneously.

On the strength of the four reasons above, one can aptly describe social media as the contemporary *agora* or what Maraldo (2014) called the "*agora* of the 21st century" (p.36). As a contemporary *agora*, social media enhance public philosophy. Of course, it is not solely a discourse in the sense of "professional philosophers engaging with non-professionals, in a non-academic setting, with the specific aim of exploring issues philosophically" (Weinstein, 2014, p.33). Instead, and most importantly, it is also a philosophical encounter between philosophers themselves in virtual and non-academic settings. The concept of social media as contemporary *agora* calls for optimal utilization of the different platforms various philosophical organizations use to engage in intellectual discourse. These platforms should no longer play informative and connective philosophical roles alone. They are to serve as forums for philosophical discourses. Using this platform, a philosopher should tackle issues that are of utmost importance to the public. This new approach to philosophic enterprise is sure to salvage the image of philosophy so often battered by denigrating appellations and subsequently classified as mere abstract thought without any practical result. Such will complement the efforts of many philosophical societies already working assiduously to

better the image of philosophy. These societies include *Philosophy for Children Movement*, *Philosophy Learning and Teaching Organization (PLATO)*, *Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC)*, *Public Philosophy Network (PPN)*, and the *Society of Philosophers in America (SOPHIA)*. As well, it comprises journals such as *Precollege Philosophy and Public Practice*, *the Public Philosopher Podcasts*, *Philosophy Bakes Bread*, and *Hi-Phi Nation*, and so on. This paper, however, maintains that these are not to replace academic philosophy. Instead, they should serve as the forums for contemporary philosophical debate, given the relationship between social media and *agora*.

### Conclusion

Social media are prominent features of the contemporary epoch. They have both merits and demerits, thanks to their user-generated content potentials. On the positive side, social media can help disseminate information, connect people, and engender social interactions. Through social media, one can share videos, photos, messages, files, class notes, assignments, to name but a few. In general social media can enhance academic performance if adequately utilized. Besides, they play useful roles in business advertisement and doctor-patient relationships. On the contrary, if poorly handled, they can lead to poor academic performance among students, internet addiction, and invasion of people's privacy. Besides, they can encourage children's access to pornography, increase cyber-bullying, identity theft, and other cybercrimes.

Despite the demerits of social media, this paper maintains that their merits predominate. It took particular note of the role social media play in contemporary philosophical debates, especially subsisting as the contemporary *agora* or *ōbí*. The paper, however, supported its position via four arguments. First, based on structure/mechanism, both *agora* and social media do not have one generally accepted definition. Second, they are social spaces available to all. Third, both of them promote social interaction. Fourth, both provide the opportunity for disseminating information to a broad heterogeneous audience. The paper, therefore, calls for the maximization of social media in the contemporary debate to enhance public philosophy. Further, it noted that public philosophy does not only imply philosophical encounters between professional philosophers and other professionals that are not philosophers. It also includes the encounter between professional philosophers in a non-academic environment. Further, public philosophy is not a substitute for academic philosophy; rather, it complements it.

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