

**KEYNOTE PRESENTATION ON “THE INTERNET WE WANT AND THE ROLE OF THE REGULATOR”: REFLECTIONS ON THE SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PUBLIC COMMUNICATION CULTURE**

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**ON**

**FAEng, FNSE, FRAES**

**BY**

**AT THE SOCIAL MEDIA SUMMIT ORGANISED BY THE CENTRE FOR INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT (CITAD) AND ITS PARTNERS IN KANO**

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**PROTOCOL**

Representatives of our governmental institutions

Custodians of our traditional institutional structures

Management, staff and partners of CITAD

Citizens of Kano, a city noted for commerce and learning

Gentlemen of the Press

Ladies and gentlemen

I am gratified by the honour and privilege extended to me to deliver the keynote paper at this summit organised by the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) and its partners.

This is a social media summit pivoted on the theme: **“The Internet we want and the role of the regulator”**. Therefore the objective is to have a conversation around what the regulator can do for the citizens to enjoy the Internet. An Internet that is an enabler of social media communication with the attendant capacity for robust participation, enlightenment and citizens’ engagement with the political, social and economic progress in order to contribute to the prosperity of Nigeria.

This is precisely what CITAD and its partners meant when they stated that the objective of the summit is to serve as a colloquium of ideas, to be a platform where modern advocacy tools and strategies will be showcased for Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in order to trigger an enthusiasm in the use of social media as a productive tool that serves the goals of networking, collaboration, innovation and development.

So, what should be the role of NCC as the national regulatory authority for telecommunications in Nigeria in ensuring the ‘birth’ of the Internet we want? What I will call the *Internet of Relevance*. The regulator is authorised by an enabling law – the Nigerian Communications Act 2003 – which states the objectives, mandate and functions of the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC). These obligations can be summarised by a conceptual framing – to ensure availability, accessibility and affordability of telecom services in Nigeria. Therefore, it bears restating that the role of NCC as a regulator, rests on the conceptual tripod of ensuring that robust telecom services are available, accessible and affordable by all who wish to subscribe to telecom services. I shall return to this later in my presentation in order to illustrate how the NCC works to fulfil this mandate.

**Values of Social Media as a Digital Public Communication Culture**

The advent of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the attendant opportunities propelled by the Internet, has revolutionised communication in contemporary society beyond what Marshall McLuhan visualised in his seminal work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), where he demonstrated the centrality of the channel of communication over the message. According to McLuhan, “the medium is the message”.

The significance of the medium was underscored by some scholars (Cornfield, Carson, Kalis and Simon, 2007) when they did an assessment of the American politics in the Fall of 2004, focusing on the role of bloggers. Cornfield and his colleagues came up with a publication characterising the online space and social media as the ‘Fifth Estate’ in order to properly describe the social media networks as a new centre of power in the way the Fourth Estate (the historical press) had been.

Although critical thinkers have pointed to how dysfunctional online digitised communication can undermine the social order – undercut privacy, promote inordinate capital accumulation by technology companies, and possibly fan the embers of crises – other voices of reason have provided both intellectual and practical foundation for the utilitarian value of new communication technologies especially as expressed in social media.

Let me amplify the voice of CITAD that had noted regrettably in the invitation letter sent to me to present this keynote, that many people take social media to be platforms for mere exchange of pleasantries. From the few illustration above, the social media does much more than that to redefine relationship management. Social media has infiltrated all the nooks and crannies of our life as fundamental channels of information and education, marketing (online- transactions) and so on, with increased efficiency and radical departure from the hitherto ‘bricks and mortals’ business approach known to many.

In medical and health care, for instance, social media platforms such as WhatsApp have become very useful in exchanging vital information for patients’ treatment while the Instagram has also been extensively deployed for tourism and commercial/marketing activities of all kinds.

Today, politicians have become so attracted to social media. Some studies (Ceron 2017; Burson-Marsteller 2014) have affirmed that more than two-thirds of the world’s heads of states and governments are on social media. That assembly of leaders include our own President, His Excellency Muhammadu Buhari, CGFR.

Similarly, organisations have used social media largely for corporate communications, consumer engagements and complaints management. The NCC is a leading light of public sector organisations in Africa that realised quite early, the uniqueness of social media in information management, stakeholder engagements and complaints resolution. As at 5.35PM on July 5, 2019, NCC followership on Facebook was 143,880; on Twitter, it was 69,800; on LinkedIn, it was 50,604; and on Instagram, 10,200.

How did we get there? Sometimes, NCC posts up to 10 items daily, comprising narratives of its events and activities in texts, photography, videography and infographics. We also post special contents to inform and educate stakeholders, followers and telecom consumers about the operations, policies, guidelines, regulations, legislations and developments in the telecom ecosystem both nationally and internationally. We do this in order to provide additional opportunity for our stakeholders – which include the distinguished ladies and gentlemen in this hall – to engage us through questions, observations and sometimes heated commentaries.

In other words, through its social media platforms, the NCC engages stakeholders and followers in real-time transmission of information and participation, and because we also engage in real-time monitoring of how our online followers respond and react to our posts, we are also able to respond to their requests and concerns in real-time. In digital parlance, this is called *social listening.*

Our flagship online platform – the NCC website – has also been described by many as a repository of information on the industry for all stakeholders to explore. It is, therefore, not surprising that NCC has received several awards for its robust social and online media presence. This underscores the fact that the deployment and effective utilisation of social media is now a central determinant of organisational performance and transformation.

**The Demonstrated Role of the Regulator**

At this juncture, having discussed some of the values of social media to underline the importance, influence and derivable benefits of digitised social networking, permit me to return to where we started the discourse. This is particularly important in order to put in concrete context the Internet we need – that is what I called the Internet of Relevance – rather than the Internet we want, and to show what the regulator of telecoms in Nigeria has done to fulfil that aspiration.

You will recall that I had earlier stated that the NCC does not regulate technology and applications such as the Over-The-Top (OTT) services, for example, WhatsApp. However, realising the utilitarian value of such technologies and the benefits derivable from innovations which such applications can engender, the Management of NCC, under my leadership, conceptualised an **8-Point Agenda** upon assumption of office in 2015.

Ladies and gentlemen, it may interest you to know that the NCC Management came up with the Agenda in order to, among other reasons, focus on the role telecoms is expected to play within the framework of the Internet we need. So, the first item on the Agenda is to facilitate broadband penetration in order to enhance universal access to affordable broadband services.

To achieve this, NCC was mandated to increase broadband penetration in Nigeria to 30 percent by 2018. We have achieved and surpassed the target, and we are instituting processes to achieve higher target by 2023. The Commission has put in place regulatory frameworks such as setting up a Broadband Implementation Committee. Infrastructure companies (INFRACOS) have also been licensed to deploy broadband infrastructure across the six geo-political zones and Lagos. Lagos was carved out as the seventh zone because of its commercial importance to the Nigerian telecom ecosystem. The INFRACO initiative has a provision for Access Point in each of the 774 local government areas of the country, with a data speed of 10 Gbps.

We have also achieved greater milestones regarding other items on the Agenda. These include optimising the benefits of spectrum, improving quality of service; promoting ICT innovation and investment opportunities. Other areas of the agenda are facilitating strategic collaboration and partnership of all stakeholders, just as the one we are having with CITAD and its partners today. We have projected the issue of protecting and empowering telecom consumer as non-negotiable and NCC is irrevocably committed to this, just as we are dedicated to promoting fair competition and inclusive growth, as well as promoting regulatory excellence and operational efficiency.

Permit me to elaborate an aspect of our commitment to consumer education and protection. Earlier this year, the NCC outreach for consumer education began to focus the theme: MITIGATING EFFECTS OF CYBERCRIMES: THE ROLE OF THE TELECOM CONSUMERS. This is to demonstrate the importance of education in tackling crimes in the Internet. As the regulator of telecoms, NCC considered it necessary to avail the consumer with all the information he or she may require to avoid being a victim of cyber criminals. This is a clear representation of the role of the regulator in ensuring Nigerians operate within the environment of an Internet of relevance. The NCC also expects the safety of the Internet environment to improve for Nigerians when the Internet Code of Governance is instituted.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, if you reflect on the foregoing programmatic vision encapsulated in the 8-Point Agenda, you will see the organic thread that connects all of them together, but as I had earlier mentioned, the focus for us as a regulator, is to ensure availability, accessibility and affordability of communication services. As I speak, Nigeria has recorded over 174 million subscription to telephony, remember that as at the year 2000 we had less than 500,000 telephone lines. Importantly (because we are gathered here to reflect on the Internet), over 122 million people have access to the Internet in Nigeria.

Despite our challenges – which are mostly environmental – we are not resting on our oars. Across sectors, NCC has introduced novel and seminal rules of engagement, and renewed commitment to innovation and research. So far, the Commission has given more than 20 academic grants to different universities and educational institutions in the last four years. This is based on our belief that investment in research and development (R&D) is key to developing new technology products and innovations that can bring greater benefits to Nigerians in the current digital era.

As a nation, we have also recorded more ICT hubs which are accommodating young technology-savvy Nigerian youths to become entrepreneurs through innovating and designing of software to manage several activities. The Commission also sponsors these young Nigerian innovators to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) conferences to showcase their designs and applications to global investment community.

Since 2004 when NCC instituted the Schools Support Programme, the Commission and its constitutive department – the Universal Service Provision Fund (USPF) – have facilitated the construction and operation of well-equipped computer laboratories, donations of computers and other ancillary digital equipment to over 1000 educational institutions in Nigeria, among several initiatives aimed at providing digital access to institutions across the country.

The University Inter-Campus Connectivity (UnICC) project is particularly deserving of mention. “It is a support project to the National Universities Commissions' Nigerian Research and Education Network (NgREN) project, the primary purpose of which is to deliver broadband infrastructure and access to facilitate research and learning using Optic Fibre Cable (OFC)”. Under this project, fifteen (15) universities have been linked with their medical colleges.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, when we talk of the Internet we want and the role of the regulator, the foregoing are the contexts in which the regulator (NCC) has proved itself relevant to that vision. As a regulator of the digital ecosystem, the NCC has continued to expand the frontier of digital ecosystem that deepens access to the Internet for people to use social media and other online platforms for improved efficiency and effectiveness in their daily official and personal endeavours. As it has been stated earlier, NCC is also setting great examples of how social media and Internet resources can be deployed for the benefit of organisations and the society.

Just a fortnight ago, I told an institutional visitor to NCC that we have lots of ways we can use the Internet to leapfrog our development and I particularly noted NCC’s abhorrence of hate speeches and fake news. Although the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended) and particularly the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention etc.) Act (2015) have stipulated what is permissible by law with respect to how we can interact with technology and other humans through the digitised media, let me reiterate as I conclude this remark that hate speeches and fake news have no place in the Internet we want and the Internet of relevance which I advocate. I enjoin CITAD, its partners and all us here to amplify the voice of the NCC by carrying the message beyond here that the Internet we want has no space for hate speech and fake news because they are both destructive and can undermine the real gains of the digital culture for the society.

Our governmental and traditional leaders, active citizens, members of institutions of the civil society, gentlemen of the press, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, it is my profound conviction that the reflections above will nudge citizens, organisations and institutions to use the Internet and the social media responsibly to build unity of all Nigerians, to enhance cooperation, to promote production, commerce and economic growth and, above all, for the overall development of our country.

Thank you very sincerely for your attention. I wish you very fruitful and seminal deliberations.

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