

Research and Scholarship in the Digital Age. Presented at Elizade University on August 4, 2021

When social media began to take firm root as an alternative medium of self-expression (among other things) over a decade ago, many academics and professionals worried about the impact of virtual spaces on their privacy, image, and personality. They were concerned about “over-exposure,” or “over-revealing”—that is, the chances that their non-professional life (including family, religious affiliation, sexual preference) would be exposed to the world. They thought they would be “demystified” and that the respect and honor they received from friends and colleagues would wane. They preferred the first incarnation of digital communities such as academic listservs and mailing lists, which guaranteed intellect freedom and privacy.

This critique of the first incarnation of social media platforms by academics and professionals was legitimate, partly because it was exactly what it was conceived to be – a social space –a virtual community for connecting with old friends, for socio-sexual networking, for sharing vacation pictures which ordinarily shouldn’t leave the wardrobe, and for creating and sustaining relationship with people who share similar perspectives about religion, politics, and the nation state. But today, any academic who claims not to be “using” social media must be living in the Stone Age. While it is permissible for academics not to have a social media account, it is inexcusable for them not to use social media. Having a social media account and not using social media are two separate things. The former is having a name directly linked to a social media account, the latter is viewing an organization’s or someone’s timeline for news and knowledge, or to snitch! The biggest news with the most profound implication for intellectual culture are now being hosted first, on social media, before the traditional ones. Even academics who extolled mailing lists and listservs over social media many years are now finding their way into Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram—directly or through proxies. They are now on countless of WhatsApp groups.

To treat social media sensationalism as mere amusement is to miss something crucial about people, culture, and the nation state that academic research in the humanities and social sciences involves. It is to lose sight of the intersections of culture and the medium through which they manifest. I don’t have the time to watch Big Brother Naija, but with my 4,973 friends and unknown number of followers on Facebook, I’m able to keep up with all the controversies around dissident youth culture, normative sexualities, body shaming and respectability, and unwise use of time. For a historian like me who has published about children and youth in colonial Nigeria, not monitoring Big Brother Naija is like committing intellectual suicide.

Anyone who has ever read the Lagos Weekend, among other social magazines of the 1960s through the 1980s would have a serious, not a judgmental, conversation about Big Brother Naija. From the 1960s through the late 1990s, the print media, controlled my men, justified obscenity in the name of entertainment and public awareness. The Lagos Weekend for instance printed engrossing sexualized bodies of women to feed the sexual fantasies of men. One of such images featured a man sucking the breast of a young lady. There is a marked difference between traditional nude art that represents fertility and rebirth and are deeply connected with interiority, religion, and spirituality and the images in the Better Lover magazine that exploited public fantasy about obscenity for economic purposes. I’m not a behavioral psychologist, but I think that the provocative scenes of BBNaija would have the same emotive effect as the uncensored Better Lover magazine, which taught Nigerian teenagers of the 1990s how to masturbate. Ten years ago, actress Tonto Dikeh almost got crucified for trying to turn Nollywood into “Pornyhood” because of her body revealing roles in movies. But today, Nigeria has its own known porn stars and a porn site in its name.

The existence of countless socio-sexual networking platforms and WhatsApp groups reminds me of the Sun Newspaper that featured photos of beautiful Nigerian women and their addresses in the early 2000s. By reading the Sun Newspaper, the public, regardless of gender, religious affiliation and moral sensibilities, are automatically added to the community of men who bought the print because it featured women. But the newspaper's motive for featuring the women is inconvertible—to satisfy the sexual proclivities of men who controlled all the means of wealth, including subscription to the newspaper. People could only be removed from this real and imagined community of sexual lust only by refusing to buy or read the newspaper.

A deeper excursion into the history of what many would call sexual profanity and immorality in public media is relevant here. The first novel in Yoruba was not about Yoruba Christian “saints” like Samuel Ajayi Crowther, but on Segilola Eleyinju Ege, Elegberun Oko L 'Aiye (“Segilola Endowed with Fascinating Eyes, the Sweetheart of a Thousand and One Men”). Initially serialized into thirty chapters in Akede Eko (Lagos Herald), a leading bilingual newspaper, in 1929–30, published in 1931 as a novel, and later translated into English, this autobiography tells the “real” life story of a popular Lagos prostitute and her clientele, which cuts across ethnicity, social class, nationality, and race. Segilola's exploits, include, getting men “soakingly wet.” There is no single way of interpreting the past and its material culture like novels. But the popularity of this 1931 novel among the reading publics of the era reveals something really interesting about human's fascination with pleasure and obscenity.

Similarly, many Nigerians couldn't understand why former Governor of Delta State James Ibori received so much sympathy in the social media and on the streets when he was released from the UK prison in 2016 for economic crime. But history has always been kind to controversial people. For instance, in addition to numerous newspaper obituaries, at least ten thousand people, according to Eleti Ofe, a Lagos Bilingual newspaper, witnessed the burial procession, amid cameras of varying sizes, “a pomp befitting the funeral of a Caesar, a Lincoln or a Garibaldi,” of Duro Delphonso, a man who committed suicide after he shot and killed lawyer Moronfolu Abayomi at the court premises of Tinubu Square in Lagos on August 25, 1923 for establishing a case of arson and financial crime against him. Abayomi was the son-in-law of Kitoyi Ajasa and first husband of Oyinkan Abayomi, two great shapers of modern Nigeria. The scene of this event of 98 years ago can easily be mentally replayed in our imaginations of Nollywood and Hollywood films.

I have referenced to all these historical developments, not simply to prove that our ancestors were not saints or that nothing is new under the sky or that the past is a mixed bag of contradictions or that the idea of a pristine past is problematic, but to argue that the digital age, with its obvious flaws, is only a phase in the evolution of idealization of multiple publics, the creation of common interest communities, and by extension of human civilization. Social media helps critical minds to think about the past in a way that problematizes the present. The transformations made possible by 21st century digital culture, tell us about changes in sexual norms and conflicting notions of immorality, which should interest scholars. The digital age should not be treated as an “epoch” but an “episode” (to draw from Peter Ekeh's and J.F. Ade Ajayi's contention about the impact of colonialism) in the evolution of conflicting notions of indecency.

The transformation of social media from the den of ill-behaved young people to the driving force of knowledge production and dissemination requires serious attention of academics. The digital humans of today will appear as real humans in the narratives of tomorrow. Attention to digital presence should go beyond stating the obvious fact that universities and departments, professional associations, publishers, research institutes, libraries, and museums, among other powerhouses of

knowledge, now have Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts. Rather, it must be framed as how digital culture connects the past with the present, shapes data gathering, problematizes the conventional definition knowledge, and gives visibility to narratives, peoples, and communities, which would remain obscure without a liberalizing digital space.

A new way of encountering people and ideas is now challenging the old, thus creating some anxiety for people who are afraid to re-invent because of the assumption that the old is better than the new. Veteran journalists, who plied their trade when printed newspapers had to be physical transported across thousands of miles, have a strong point about bad grammar in the new digital media. Yet, their critique must also consider how censorship and editorial culture of the old print media inhibited creativity, and limited political opposition and participation. A few days ago, a veteran Fuji artist named Bola Bollington told me that his career wouldn't have waned if social media existed during his time. He attributed his current low status in the industry to a bad article a journalist wrote about him in the 1980s. Bola Bollington is definitely correct about how social media creates and recreates stardom. A few months ago, he attempted a major comeback when over 10,000 people watched him live on Facebook and Instagram as he performed at the 60th birthday of Esther Aboderin (aka Esabod), one of Nigeria's most provocative social media sensations. No Fuji artist has earned over 10,000 live views on social media. Social media creates new digital celebrities who are contesting preexisting criteria for global artistic visibility.

The discourse of new and old media has a place in the unending debate over “new” and “old” research methodology, topic, theory, writing style, and pedagogy. Much of this is a product of the fear that innovative ways of conducting research, writing, and disseminating knowledge would obliterate the old and render older producers of knowledge irrelevant. It is informed by the simple logic of market place economy, which suggests that new market drives the old away. However, the market economy does not work exactly like the knowledge production economy, even though there are similarities. This is because knowledge creation is a continuum, operating like a building block or an interlocking chain of progression, not like an iron gate, impervious to ideas. If knowledge is a continuum, the very process of creating it (such as research methodologies, writing styles, idea conceptualization, and medium for sharing) must be treated as such.

For instance, it is a truism that digital ethnography has transformed the core principles of “conventional” ethnography, collapsing the idea of time, place, and space in favor the researcher and to some extent, the subject. Yet, it does not devalue “conventional” ethnography which insist that the researcher must encounter their subject in flesh and blood. Access to digital archival materials, and photo and art exhibitions have increased the speed, while lowering the cost, logistics, and risk of conducting research; but there something uniquely valuable about inhaling the often repugnant smell of original documents or encountering, face-to-face, the energy that artists translated into a piece of art. Any critique of the digital age in African literature must also be thoughtful of how “conventional” publishing in the past inhibited literary innovation, silenced voices, and framed problematic notions of literary stardom, global acceptance, visibility, and literary legitimacy. Today, it is easier and faster to learn about Nigeria from the Nigerian Nostalgia Project Facebook page than sitting in a class where the teacher basically dictates notes composed 30 years ago; but this does not eliminate the need to promote quality classroom pedagogy that focuses on exchange of ideas between the teacher and students, and critical thinking, as opposed “banking model” that treats students like empty brains to be filled with knowledge. Virtual research has challenged the conventional definition of evidence, sources, and interpretation approach. The true scholars of the future are the ones making deep sense of the trajectory of human behavior, which forms the basis of historical and contemporary knowledge (regardless of where and how they manifest).

To reduce generational transformation in knowledge production and teaching pedagogy to “superior” and “inferior” is to miss the biggest point about human and material existence—the new exists because of the old. Much of what is considered innovative today would be treated as “obsolete” or “outdated” in the next decade. Sarki Goma Zamani Goma. The digital age in research can be equated to the jet age in terms of speed with which research is conducted and shared. But this speed is not a progressive one because the expansion of access to published literature is not matched by quality primary data gathering, rigorous scholarship, and thoughtful academic writing. Although the digital age is the era of mass production of academic works, the future of Africanist scholarship will be measured not in length but in depth; not by quantity but by quality; not by generalization, but by specificities and metanarratives that are conscious of the big picture.

The digital age in knowledge production transcends the speed with which knowledge is produced or access to data or how sources are mined, to what constitutes a researchable topic. There is no field in the humanities and social sciences that does not worry about the big questions of “relevant” or “irrelevant”; “academic” or “unacademic”; “researchable” or “unresearchable” topics. Even some departments and institutions have topics that cannot be researched because they are out of their “intellectual” traditions. Colleagues are criticized or punished (with academic rank stagnation and hazing) for publishing outside their traditional field. A true scholar, some think, must not be “everywhere”—even when they are publishing with highly reputable outlets. They must declare their narrow research interest and stick to it throughout their career—even if they have lost interest in it. The implication of this is the recycling of stale ideas and a rigid thinking frame that cannot see knowledge in their interrelated forms. An impartial observer of global scholarship trend would argue that while distinct disciplinary boundaries are important for specialization purposes, they are inadequate for studying the human and non-human worlds. Critique of writing style remains important for many disciplines because it constitutes the frame of common intelligibility of ideas. Hence, “unconventional” exposition of ideas could be treated, not as a form of innovation capable of unleashing a new line of thought, but as a transgression liable to punishment through outright failure of students in important exams or doctoral seminars.

If we accept that the 21st century offers new ways of seeing the world, we should also recognize that it challenges everything we know about topics, writing styles, and conceptualization of ideas. If all the evidence of obscenity in literature, print media, and social media presented above tells us anything, it is the call for audacity to write the history of pornography and erotica in Nigeria. Waiting to be harvested are dozens of archival materials on the politics of nudity in Nigeria and countless of nude art works of diverse eras and medium. Shouldn't we insert the discourse of nudity into the politics of decolonization if we have evidence that some supporters of colonialism argued that the Union Jack shouldn't be lowered in Nigeria because Nigerian children were still walking around naked in the late 1950s? At what point in time did the idea of an erotic Nigerian child emerge? What can the history of sexualization of women in the print media tell us about contemporary sexual violence? All the scholarship on petition writings, including those of Chima Korie, Mutiat Oladejo, and Bright Alozie, the inexhaustible archival materials, different forms of protests (oral, written, symbolic, semiotic), including open letters in the newspapers are telling us that a processed history of emotions and interiority in Nigeria is within our reach.

Critics of these types of topics would rely on moralists' and Westernization or anti-colonization trope. They would criticize potential authors of attempting to sensationalize scholarship. Yet, it was sensationalism that changed the face of scholarship forever. It is the bewilderment or the unbelievability of ideas that some people would call “sensationalism” that refined what constitutes

valid sources of history, the role of women in history, and even the agency that non-human creatures had in the past. We see it when Kenneth Dike professed the credibility of oral tradition in historical reconstruction in 1957; when Bolanle Awe criticized the organizers of the 1977 Conference on Women and Development held in Wellesley College for homogenizing global women's experience; when Oyeronke Oyewumi countered Western construction of gender in Africa in the most provocative style ever; and when an audience argued that animals don't have history after listening to my lecture at Bayero University in 2017.

Academic writing, regardless of level and field, is art. It goes beyond the communication of facts and "authentic" research and knowledge to exposition of ideas. The best academic writers, we know, are equally the best users of words. The relationship between rigorous writing and researching is symbiotic. The deeper the rigor and scope of imagination, the better the writing, since original scholarship naturally generates its own mode of communicating a distinct body of knowledge, by default. Anyone who is familiar with global knowledge dynamics would not deny the fact that most of the ideas originating from the West are dominant for two principal reasons—rigor of research and quality of writing.

The Nigerian society itself is moving faster than the models and approaches used in studying it. Language scholars have established that language use has changed over time, but this transformation in public language use is not reflecting in the quality of writing and teaching in the digital age. The answer to the "stale" and anachronistic approaches to writing, teaching, and researching is in innovative research topics, methodologies, sources, and interdisciplinarity. By default, innovative topics that blend disciplines, if properly executed, are bound to give way to new registers and vocabularies, and new ways of imagining and producing knowledge.