Chapter 3

Hashtag Activism and the Transnationalization of Nigerian–Born Movements Against Terrorism: A Critical Appraisal of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how the Nigeria-based civil society initiatives have, of late, deployed digital activism in a bid to mobilize both endogenous and exogenous institutions against the terrorist group, Boko Haram. One of these anti-terrorism movements is the #BringBackOurGirls campaign which was launched in May 2014, following the abduction by Boko Haram of 276 schoolgirls, in the Northeastern village of Chibok (Nigeria). The #BringBackOurGirls” movement quickly attracted support from millions of voices (including Heads of States, their wives and celebrities) all over the world. In spite of its internationalization, the campaign has variously been critiqued. Many critics have arguably equated it with mere “clickitivism”. Using empirical understandings, this chapter appraises the #BringBackOurGirls campaign vis-à-vis the fight against terrorism in Nigeria. The chapter starts by examining the genesis of the movement and its progressive trans-nationalization. It proceeds to exploring the extent to which the movement could be seen as “clicktivism”; and ends with a review of some of its successes.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Internet blogging among others, have constituted strategic instruments for political protests, democratic consolidation and many other forms of socio-political change in countries across the world. These media have revolutionized the conduct of political activism as they have made it possible for any computer-literate citizen to (i) organize large groups of people [without an organization], (ii) share ideas, messages, and viewpoints and (iii) support specific causes without passing through the established media of communication. In fact, with the aid of a social media click, one is today capable of taking direct and possibly militant actions in view of attaining well defined social or political aims. In tandem with this, it is more and more axiomatic that the social media offer for easier and quicker ways to support an organization or a cause (Gerbaudo 2017; Jordan & Taylor 2004; Morozow, 2011; Sivitanides & Shah 2011). They also represent strategic weapons for combating all forms of political problems (ranging from dictatorship to terrorism), and bringing about socio-political change in any setting. This aphorism is rationalized by the fact that, in recent years, many national and international political movements have known impressive success thanks to the social media. Egregious examples of these movements include the famous 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the 2012 #OccupyWallStreet campaign, the UK Uncut movement, the #JeSuisCharlie campaign and the 2012 – 2016 Black Lives Matter movement among others.

In view of all the immense potential of the social media, a number of critics are of the persuasion that online activism may also be strategic in the fight against global terrorism in this present digital era as well as in the future. As reviewed by Morse (2014), hashtag activism has the potential to provoke the widespread condemnation of terrorist groups as well as the atrocities they commit. It may contribute to tarnishing their image and spurring governments and international opinion leaders to amplify their efforts against such groups. All these factors have the potential to affect terrorist groups’ activities to a considerable extent. Morse thus opines that:

*Groups like Al Qaeda and Al Shabab use social media extensively: it’s not beyond the realms of possibility to imagine them employing a social media editor in the future. If hashtag activism really spits in their custard, such an employee may tell his boss ‘this [online movement is] going to make our lives hell and it’s just not worth it.’ For all that is wrong with hashtag activism, it is only going to get more powerful in the future. It’s not to be sniffed at. (p. 54)*

Conscious of the great potential of the digital technologies, Nigeria-based civil society organizations and human rights activists have, in recent times, embarked
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