

**SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY: CATALYST FOR
CHANGE OR INSTRUMENT OF HARM**

By

Babatunde-Atobatele Nicholas

Law Student @ OBAFEMI AWOLOWO UNIVERSITY || nicholasbabatunde97@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

At its essence, human rights advocacy is founded on the pursuit of dignity, accountability, and justice for the most vulnerable- a pursuit that is in constant need of adaptation to the evolving landscapes of power and communication. It is in the evolving structure of communication that the internet emerges in the 21st century. The Internet is painstakingly an enormous expansion to human Right Activism development. Literally, it is considered a useful key or essential to Political participation; human development and social advancement causing massive Internet revolution in the world. In the present day context, where digital communication permeates every aspect of life, the role of digital media platforms now entail public discourse, where accountability can be demanded in real time. Unfortunately, the same digital forum which effortlessly amplifies the cry of justice, is also the forum, which is capable of hampering the rights it protected in the first place. Against this backdrop, this essay is a scholastic attempt at examining and striking a balance between the dual effect of Human Right Advocacy in the 21st century.

Keywords: *Human Rights Advocacy, Social Media, Digital Age, Misinformation, Cyberbullying, Online Activism.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In 2013, a 13 year old girl Ochanya Ogbanje, from Benue state, was entrusted to the care of her aunt for education. During her stay with her aunt, she endured multiple sexual intercourse with her aunt's husband and her aunt's son for over five years. This abuse led to a Vesicovaginal fistula (VVF). Subsequently, The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) brought Ochanya's case to the Federal High Court and the judge dismissed the case on the grounds that the case lacked sufficient evidence. Ochanya suffered severe pain in her last days until she tragically died in 2018.

7 years after Ochanya's death, the social media responded with the hashtag #JusticeforOchanya - a national movement, which in less than two days, attracted over a hundred thousand petition signatures, leading the case to be reopened. However, this same social media platforms that helped Ochanya advocate her rights, served as an efficient tool for the cyberbullying of the judge, spread of untrue facts, and the public branding of the crime suspects as "rapists", without a formal conviction. Ochanya's case is an epitome of the two-fold nature of the digital age -an age characterized by the transformative power of social media which has reshaped and still continues to reshape human rights advocacy globally.

On this note, there is no doubt that social media has a two-fold effect on human rights advocacy: first, it serves as a means of amplification for marginalized groups, as seen in Ochanya's case and secondly, it can operate as an unregulated space where due process can be evaded through cyber bullying, misinformation and defamation. Nonetheless, the need to interrogate this duality is evident in the inadequacy of simply celebrating or condemning the technology. This then begs the question, Quo Vadis?

2.0 CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Social media is considered a huge development in human civilization,¹⁰⁰ but its application to human rights advocacy has a distinct conceptual history. Before the digital age, human rights advocacy was mainly saddled on the shoulders of a few institutions like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, where meticulous report-writing, press releases, and diplomatic channels were the means of advocacy. However, this process, while effective, was typically slow.

¹⁰⁰AM Richards and SR Sheyigari, 'The Influence of Social Media on Human Rights Activism and Political Participation in North Central' (2024) 8(5) Wukari International Studies Journal

Fortunately, the spread of internet services was gradual but steady, driven by the government's liberalization of the telecommunications sector in 2001. With the entrance of providers like MTN, Glo, and Airtel, mobile internet became increasingly accessible, laying the foundation for social media adoption. In Nigeria, the evolution of social media began with platforms like Hi5 and MySpace which introduced for the first time online profiles and friend networks. However, the platform was short-lived due to slow and expensive internet access. This challenge changed dramatically with Facebook's dominance (2007–2012), which became the go-to platform due to its simplicity and power to connect Nigerians globally.¹⁰¹

Interestingly, while the world experienced the evolution of the digital age through these platforms, the channels of human rights advocacy were quietly strengthening. The Arab spring of 2011, was the first global revelation of the catalytic role of social media as a tool for change and justice.¹⁰² With just a post on Facebook from a local witness, an international movement was born which spread across several African countries. Subsequently after the Arab Spring, there have been multiple instances where 'Netizens'¹⁰³ have championed a pivotal change via social media. In Nigeria alone, these platforms have been repeatedly utilized through movements like #BringOurGirlsBack, #EndSars and most recently #JusticeForOchanya. However, despite the growing use of these platforms to seek Justice, there has also been a prevalent number of fallacious claims and hate speech.

3.0 SOCIAL MEDIA AS A CATALYST FOR HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Building on the evolution of the internet and social media platforms, social media has undeniably strengthened human rights advocacy by acting as a catalyst for change. Firstly, the core impact of social media in raising legal awareness is its ability to democratize information. Legal matters, which were once confined to law books, courtrooms, libraries and law offices, are now more visible and accessible than ever.¹⁰⁴ The digital age, through social media platforms, is characterized by a decentralized communication system between individuals across every part of the world. Thus, this networking system has also aided legal awareness by exposing injustice. In this regard, Social Networking Sites (SNS) function as virtual bulletin boards for public announcements and

¹⁰¹ Joyce, 'The History of Social Media in Nigeria' (EasyUssdCode, 18 July 2025) <<https://easyussdcode.com/the-history-of-social-media-in-nigeria/>> accessed 27 October 2025

¹⁰² Philip N Howard and others, 'Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media during the Arab Spring?' (2011) SSRN Electronic Journal <<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2595096>> accessed 28 March 2026

¹⁰³ 'Netizens', The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster 2019)

¹⁰⁴ Isaac Ogunsan, 'The Role of Social Media Platforms in Raising Awareness of Legal Rights in the United States' (2024) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/388179414_The_Role_of_Social_Media_Platforms_in_Raising_Awareness_of_Legal_Rights_in_the_United_States> accessed 27 October 2025

provide an environment where users discuss, exchange, and even debate public issues of interest, as seen in the Ochanya case.

In addition, the formation of online communities where users can network with like-minded people, seek info and participate in discussions can fill in the gap caused by the decline in mass media and come to circumvent it in the process¹⁰⁵. Subsequently, the social network system has become a significant instrument of advocacy for grassroots activists, concerned citizens, and the mobilization of society, using them as catalysts and driving instruments of social change on a global scale.¹⁰⁶

Lastly, beyond the use of social media as a platform to amplify human rights advocacy, it has also served as an effective means of protection of the identity of the victims and protesters. This was a key instrument in the success of the #EndSarsProtest, reason being that there were alleged threats from the Nigerian government. Through special features on social media apps, it allows victims and protesters to share their stories while maintaining a degree of anonymity, shielding them from immediate physical reprisal or abuse.

4.0 SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF HARM IN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY.

To paint the full picture of the role of social media, it is worth noting that despite social media's catalytic role in human rights advocacy, it still poses a potential instrument of harm to society if not properly used.

The first of the many problems social networking sites face is the rise of fake news and disinformation exchange,¹⁰⁷ which hinders efficient human rights advocacy. Anyone who has access to the internet wields the power not only to amplify authentic information, but also to project defamatory or hate speeches which hamper the right to dignity of another individual. It is unfortunate to note that social platforms operate in a manner which prioritizes sensationalism over accuracy of facts. A lucid example, was during the #EndSARS movement, where there were a lot of manipulated videos trending online, which in turn led to confusion and undermining of credible advocacy efforts. A similar situation came into play, in Ochanya's case, where social media users

¹⁰⁵ Atte Oksanen and others, 'Online Communities Come with Real-World Consequences for Individuals and Societies' (2024) 2(1) Communications Psychology <<https://doi.org/10.1038/s44271-024-00112-6>> accessed 28th March 2026

¹⁰⁶ AA Rahman, 'Navigating the Digital Age: Social Networking Sites and the Protection of Freedom of Expression' (2024) 5(3) Research Journal in Advanced Humanities 594 <<https://doi.org/10.58256/6ay4et86>> accessed 11th October 2025

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

prematurely condemned the accused men as rapists even before a judicial verdict was reached, thus blurring the line between activism and defamation.

Secondly, the emergence of social media in the digital age has undeniably brought about what is known as “cyber bullying”. Recently, the Nigerian government took down approximately 59 million pieces of content considered "harmful" or "offensive" across social media platforms like TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, and X.¹⁰⁸ These numbers are testament to the alarming rate of cyber bullying alone which occurs in the Nigerian digital space. In recent years, the constant practice of netizens posting nude contents of individuals who are at loggerheads is a classic example of the potential harm which the digital age has brought through social media. While social platforms like X are efficient tools for public discourse and social interaction, they also serve as fertile grounds for embarrassments, making activists and victims targets of online mobs. Essentially, while social media might provide a platform for human rights advocacy, it also wields an unchecked capability of being misused for activities which undermines its main essence.

5.0 STRIKING THE BALANCE AMIDST THE DUAL NATURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY

Having understood that the presence of social media in this digital age, has undeniably brought about the democratization of information and amplification of marginalized voices, its dual nature necessitates an intentional and conscious strategy to strike a balance between protecting citizens against harm and empowering advocacy. It's worth noting that striking this balance will take a fair mixture of ethical engagement from citizens and structural reforms by these social media platforms.

At the individual level, responsible usage begins with digital literacy. Digital literacy includes both the technical ability and emotional skill level needed to generate thought and communicate in multiple formats within digital environments.¹⁰⁹ Thus one of the most efficient ways by which Netizens can communicate without impeding on the rights of another, is by assessing the veracity of information before sharing or amplifying it. The spread of misinformation most times are usually as a result of unchecked facts.

¹⁰⁸ Azeez Kareem, ‘Nigeria removes 59m harmful posts, shuts 13.5m social media accounts’ The Guardian (Nigeria, 20 August 2025) <<https://guardian.ng/news/nigeria-metro/nigeria-removes-59m-harmful-posts-shuts-13-5m-social-media-accounts/>> accessed 1 March 2026

¹⁰⁹ Fonseca, Joselia & Borges Tiago, Maria, “Digital Literacy Education and Cyberbullying Combat: Scope and Perspectives” (2024) <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/381091811_Digital_Literacy_Education_and_Cyberbullying_Combat_Scope_and_Perspectives> accessed 30th March 2026

Secondly, at the structural level, social media platforms can aid in balancing the dual nature of social media on human rights advocacy. To achieve this, there must be an effective structure for content moderation. Content moderation must change from opaque, inconsistently applied policies to a transparent system of framework that respects not only the freedom of expression but also the right to dignity of netizens. This is a vital element to balancing the tides of digital activism and online harm, reason being that social media platforms allow the amplification of movements like #JusticeForOchanya to flourish by allowing unfiltered voices to demand accountability. On the other hand, the same absence of oversight permits cyberbullying, defamation, and the spread of misinformation which in turn poses a destruction of the very justice these same advocates seek. It can be argued that if there were effective content moderation within social media platforms, the premature branding of the accused in Ochanya's case as "rapists" before any judicial verdict, could have been struck out or could have been mitigated by effective content moderation.

Additionally, beyond content moderation alone, there is also a pressing need for adequate regulatory laws by government and other independent bodies, to ensure accountability on the path of social platforms. Reason being that social media platforms like instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, make their own rules stating what is allowed and what not, to put in other words, they personally determine what they take down and what they leave. Thus, government agencies must also step in to provide guidance to content moderation while respecting the right to expression. Nigeria for example, through the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) has introduced regulatory codes which mandates that social platforms like X, Facebook and TikTok, conform to national laws.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Gleaning from the classical examples where social media has been both instruments of good and evil, the debate seems not to be one of goodness or badness, rather, it borders more on its nature as a two-edged sword whose impact is dependent on the hands that wield it. The realization of this dual reality, further explains why our usage of the internet, and social platforms must be approached with constant consciousness and responsibility.

To put in other words, it means pausing before you share, and asking whether your acts may impede on the rights of another. The answers you give yourself to these questions will determine whether you are serving as a catalyst to human rights advocacy or whether you are further contributing to its potential as a harm to it.

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