Social Media - a double-edged sword

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In the aftermath of the killing of a Nigerian lady by 'online friends', educationists engage in a robust debate on the dangers of an unrestricted internet amongst the youth.

It was a story reminiscent of most late night horror thrillers. Its denouement was no less shocking and tragic. A youthful pretty lady makes friends on the internet and instantly meets friends who are thousands of miles away. This is the beginning of an exciting friendship fraught with uncertainties ,but yet budding with immense possibilities yearning to be explored by the youths, begins slow paced but soon quickens. The sad end to the tale gives no credit to the endless benefits one of the players was looking forward to.

Four young men... became the tragic progenitors in the sordid tale. [The victim], daughter of an army general, became the unfortunate victim in a macabre tale that acted out in the city of hopes and unfulfilled aspirations, Lagos. The online friendship which had brought smiles to thousands of other youths around the world, ended in a remote hotel room somewhere in the heart of the nation's former capital.

The police say the defendants along with some others still at large, raped and robbed the deceased of valuables that included an international passport, a mobile phone, bags, wristwatches and jewellery. This was, of course, after they were alleged to have 'with intent to harm, did unlawfully cause an obnoxious substance known as Rohypnol flunitrazepam tablets to be administered on [the victim] against her consent and caused her grievous harm...Rohypnol Flunitrazepam tablets was applied via a Ribena fruit juice drink, binding her hands with chain, padlocked and taped her legs, neck and mouth with sellotape, giving her fist blows all over her body, giving her several human bites, tortured and strangled her to death."

The story has, of course, generated anguish in the victim's family, outrage in the media, shock in a nation not totally alienated to violence against women, frenetic statements amongst the nation's security agencies, an equal frenzy in government circles and uproar on the internet. But more agonizing is the debate amongst educationists and parents who all agree that the internet world was posing a threat to the nation's youth, but are unable to come to any form of agreement on how its use can be monitored so that such sordid tales will not be the order of the day.

A parent, Hajiya Binta Audu (not actual name) speaks passionately on the ills the internet is generating amongst the youths, and calls on stringent measures to be applied to curtail its use amongst the productive segment of the nation. 'Which parent would not be appalled by the death of the young lady? It is horrible. Nothing can explain away the actions of the young men who carried out this heinous act. But that is what the internet has been turned into. Its use needs to be monitored by the authorities, so that such things do not happen again.'

While a cross section of educationists agree on the dangers posed by the internet to the average youth, they have their own opinions on how its use could be made beneficial, rather than injurious.

'It has to be properly monitored so that people would not use it as a platform for criminality, as it is been done now by many youths. It should be the work of the government to do that. How they do it is best left for them to decide, of course. Whatever course of action they take on its monitoring should not affect those numerous legitimate users of the internet,' says Umar Kardau Aliyu, a teacher with the Government Secondary School, New Nyanya, Nassarawa state.

For Usman Owunu, another teacher with a public school, the era of the internet has brought a new set of challenges for teachers in both the private sector and public institutions. 'In fact if the government will take over the monitoring of the internet it would solve a lot of problems for many of the teachers. Especially in the use of the Facebook, the negative impact is more than the positive one. I discovered something with the Facebook, in particular. When the teacher is in class many students prefer to browse the online site rather than listen to the teacher. The government should particularly nip in the bud the use of the internet amongst our students, especially during classes.'

For Whisky Benson, principal of Divine Mercy Secondary School, Garki, the use of the internet could be explored positively on behalf of the youths by perceptive parents and teachers. He enthuses in a brief chat with *Daily Trust* 'we should look inwards. Most of our satellite televisions are regulated. If you are not of a particular age you cannot watch some films. That tells you that it is always good to regulate some aspects of our lives that involve our children. There should also be a censors board as regards the internet. Nobody is disputing its usefulness however. Here in the school we legalise the use of laptops amongst our students.

That allows them to go into the net to search for materials that will improve their study academically...immediately they are coming into the premises with the computers though, the first port of call is the administration block where the systems are coded by our systems analyst. It is only when the school wants them to use them and with the strict supervision of the teachers that they unlock the code, and give the computers to the students for access. They are monitored all through and immediately after the class use, the laptops are collected back.'

Director of the International Institute of Journalism, Abuja, Dr Emman Shehu, while agreeing on the dangers posed by the internet amongst youths, however cautions against its muzzling by the authorities. In an interview, he opines inter alia: 'the social media has its advantages and disadvantages. The advantages far outweigh its disadvantages. It's like in medicine every drug has its side effects. So it all depends on how you control its side effects. The moment you begin to try to curtail the social media you begin to come into the critical and sensitive area of enforcement or censorship which is going to be disastrous, because the whole idea of the social media is the freedom that it gives in real time, for people to be able to discuss freely across borders and this has never happened before.

This is the power of technology which has made this possible, so to begin to put controls in place will amount to censorship and this would become a side effect. It will now fall into the hands of politicians, leaders who will now use it to their own advantage. My belief is that anyone who uses the internet should know that he has a sense of responsibility. He or she is meeting people they don't know, so they have to be discerning. It's like going to a party and meeting many people. There is no censorship in meeting these people, but you have to comport yourself. You know that because you are with friends and acquaintances does not mean you should trust everybody...'

While the remains of the victim [was] expected to be buried in September, the sword of justice will wield its influence over the heads of her 'online friends' a month after. The tears are yet to cease in the eyes of friends and families. Equally the debate on the use of the social media amongst the youths will continue for a long time to come.

Source: allAfrica

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