

Trade Unionism And Social Media Utilization: A Study Of Nulge, Kogi State Chapter

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Abstract

Over the years, the activities of the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees - NULGE, as a trade union representing the local government employees seem not to have impact, in terms of meeting their needs like those of ASUU and Nigerian Medical Association. They hardly embark on industrial actions such as strike and protest for wage increments, unlike their counterparts. And even when they threaten to embark on industrial action the government seems not to take their agitation seriously as those of other unions. This study therefore aims to investigate the challenges militating against NULGE's 'fight' for the welfare of its members. The study also examined the role of social media in promoting the realization of trade union's objectives, with particular reference to NULGE, Kogi State chapter. To achieve the objective of the study, survey method of research is adopted. This is to enable the researcher generate relevant information/data, through questionnaire and interview from members of the union which constitutes the study population. The study will adopt Chi-square as its tool of analysis. And simple percentage will also be used to describe findings from the field.

Keywords: trade unionism; social media; NULGE; utilization; chapter

Introduction

On a general note, trade unions are formed to fight for the welfare of their members. The fight is usually between the employees and their employers. In agitating for their rights or welfare, trade unions use different approaches and even resort to industrial actions such as peaceful protest or demonstration, dialogue, collective bargaining and strike action. Whichever method is adopted by the union, communication is involved. As Edino and Agba, (2015, pp.57-58) have rightly pointed out, that "Communication is the life wire of every vibrant and successful organization because, without communication, workers would not have direction, and coordination will be hampered and circumvented". In recent time however, most organizations, including trade unions have become very active in the social media. Trade unions do not only register their presence online, but also use the social media such as Facebook, website, and WhatsApp, not only to communicate with members, but, they also use the social media to establish and publicize their plights and demands, especially when in dispute with their employers. Cases in point include the Academic Staff Union of

Universities (ASUU), Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) and the umbrella body like National Association of Nigerian Students (NANS) and the umbrella body like Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC).

It is against this background that this paper investigated the role of social media in trade unionism with particular reference to the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE), Kogi State chapter. Specifically, the objective of the paper is to ascertain whether or not NULGE is active on the social media in terms of its advocacy for the welfare of its members. The study also attempts to find out the challenges, if any, that are militating against NULGE's activity on the social media as an avenue to contend with their employer- the government, and the extent to which the social media has help in coordinating the activities of NULGE as a trade union.

Conceptual Clarification

In a study of this nature, it is pertinent to define some key concepts as used in the discourse. As Obasi (2000, p23) rightly asserts "Every academic discipline has concepts that to some reasonable degree, distinguish it from other disciplines. Experts in any discipline, can easily identify their discipline by merely seeing its central concepts listed out". It is against this backdrop that the following concepts are given operational definitions.

- a. **Social media:** this is a form of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other contents such as videos and audios. It includes Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter etc.
- b. **Trade Union:** trade union or labour union is an organization of workers or employees that is formed to protect the rights and interests of its members.
- c. **WhatsApp:** this is a cross-platform instant messaging application that allows phones like Android, BlackBerry, iPhone, Window phone and Nokia Smartphone users to exchange text, image, video and audio messages. (Margaret, 2013 retrieved from <https://searchmobile.computing.techtarget.com> on 18/09/2019, at 4:51 am)
- d. **Facebook:** is a popular free social networking website that allows registered users to create profiles, upload photos and video, send messages and keep in touch with friends, family and colleagues.
- e. **Twitter:** is a social network and communication service launched in 2006 and used by millions of people and organizations to quickly share and discover information.

Historical Background to National Union for Local Government Employees in Nigeria (NULGE)

The quest to fight for the welfare of workers has always necessitated the formation of trade unions across the globe. Furthermore, experience has shown that while employers of labour would always want to minimize cost and maximize profit, labour on the other hand would want to maximize wages and/or salaries and minimize time, energy and work process. Consequently, both the employees and employers of labour- management, have their separate associations (unions) that dialogue, negotiate and drive home their demands for the welfare of their members.

Thus, the origin of a national union for local government employees in Nigeria dates back to 1943 when the Federal Union of Native Administration Staff (FUNAS) was first registered as a trade union (Ocheni, Atakpa and Nwankwo, (2013, p608). The union changed its name to the Nigerian Union of Local Authority Staff (NULAS). And in 1978, through the efforts of local government workers, the present body, Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE) was formed and subsequently affiliated to the Nigerian Labour Congress (NLC) (Ocheni, et al, 2013).

NULGE has the following broad objectives among others:

1. Establishment and maintenance of just and proper hours of work, rates of pay and conditions of work;

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2. Advancement of the education and training of members and employees of the local government;
3. Promotion of the welfare of members, including an enabling work environment;
4. Encouragement of dialogue and participation in the decision-making process of its members at the local, state and national or federal levels;
5. Cooperate with other trade union bodies and the NLC in championing the cause and welfare of workers generally and the employees of the local government in particular (Agalamanyi, 2004, Ocheni, et al, 2013).

NULGE's Channels and Media of Communication

Basically, every organization including trade unions have channels of communication. Ocheni, et al (2013, p612) have identified the channels and media of communication put in place by NULGE, over the years, to include the following:

- The chain of command- top-down channel of communication,
- Posters on notice boards,
- Loudspeaker system,
- Departmental journals or periodicals,
- Annual reports,
- Employees handbook and pamphlets,
- Information racks
- The grapevine
- The employee union and
- Letters and pay inserts.

In addition to the above listed channels of communication, experience has also shown that modern organizations, including trade unions have become very active in the social media, as means of not only communicating with members, but to the government and members of the public. Examples of the social media platforms include: Facebook, WhatsApp, Website, Twitter, and others.

Uses of Social Media by Trade Unions

Experience has shown that trade unions, like every individual and corporate organizations use the social media in the following ways among others:

- To transmit notice of meetings
- Meeting resolutions or communiques
- Pictures and photographs of events
- Videos of events
- Audio messages
- Campaign during elections and other publicities.

In addition to the above, Vincent and Alex (2018) have pointed out some other functions of the social media to trade unionism as follows:

- ★ Campaign organizing activities
- ★ Developing solidarity through networking
- ★ Expansive solidarity and worker empowerment
- ★ Mobilization activities
- ★ Connecting with online activist network
- ★ Creating new forms of collective action and
- ★ Enhancing the legitimacy of a labour campaign

Advantages of Social Media to Trade Unions

There are a number of benefits of social media to trade unionism. Some of the benefits are highlighted below:

- i. Social media allow un 64-72 ave intimate and personal conversation with hundreds and thousands of members and supporters.
- ii. It allows for unmediated communication and dialogue across vast distances and at any time of the day or night.
- iii. Through the social media networking, Unions can create a virtual face for their organization.
- iv. Also, when used to disseminate information about operating policies, initiatives and progress of the union, the social media helps to establish executive transparency (unionism.file.WordPress.com).

In a nutshell, social media are useful to trade unions in the following four major ways.

1. Information transmission: this includes sharing and promoting information about union activities such as campaign, strike, meetings, events etc.
2. Education: this includes providing easy, timely access to research and other union publications.
3. Outreach: links to and partnership with national center, international trade union movement, civil society and other friendly organizations.
4. Engagement: this includes direct consultation with the members on membership matters, grievances handling, regulations, policy, collective bargaining etc (unionism.file.WordPress.com).

Methodology

In order to arrive at a logical conclusion, both secondary and primary methods of data collection were adopted. The secondary method includes the consultation of textbooks, journals and internet materials, while the primary method includes questionnaire and semi-structured interview.

Population of Study

The population of the study is the employees of the twenty one (21) local governments in Kogi State which is about 20, 000 workers (NULGE Executive, 2019).

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The 21 local governments were divided into three strata- in accordance with the three senatorial districts which are, Kogi East, Kogi Central and Kogi West respectively. Based on this premises, a purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 employees, each, from 3 local governments in a senatorial district- implying, 60 employees from each senatorial district. According to Obasi (2000, p141) purposive or judgmental sampling "involves handpicking desired sample elements to ensure that such elements are included". Obasi stressed that " This high degree of selectivity involved, is meant to guarantee that all relevant strata are represented in the sample. Therefore, $60 \times 3 = 180$ employees from the three senatorial districts. In addition, 20 executive members of NULGE were also selected across board- bringing the sample size to 200 respondents. The table below shows the sampling procedure.

Table 1: Showing Sampling Procedure

Senatorial Districts	Local Government	Number of Respondents
K o g i E a s t	A n k p a	0
	I d a h	0
	O f u	0
K o g i C e n t r a l	A d a v i	0
	A j a o k u t a	0
	O k e n e	0
K o g i W e s t	K a b a / B u n u	0

	Y a g b a E a s t	2	0
	Y a g 64-72 V e s t	2	0
NULGE Executives	A c r o s s B o a r d	2	0
T o t a l		2	0

Source: Edino's Field Work (2019)

Theoretical Framework

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is adopted as the framework of analysis for this paper.

Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)

Uses and Gratification Theory is an audience-centered theory that focuses on what people do with media as opposed to what media does to people. Jay Blumler and Danis McQuail are the early proponents of UGT. The basic assumption of the theory is that, individuals have power over their media usage, rather than positioning individuals as passive consumers of media. The Uses and Gratification Theory explores how individuals deliberately seek out media to fulfill certain needs or goals (www.learning-theories.com).

Modern day application of UGT has more relevance than ever as a tool for understanding how individuals connect technologies around them in order to transmit information. These technologies span from internet to video gaming to mobile phones. Thus, Uses and Gratification Theory attempts to analyze the effect of mobile phones, including sociability, entertainment and its role in promoting communication in trade unionism. Furthermore, when using social media, users can be motivated by factors such as a need to vent negative feelings, recognition and cognitive needs (www.learning-theories.com). The application of the Uses and Gratification Theory implies that NULGE as a trade union uses the social media (WhatsApp) as a medium of communication among its members. And by using the medium, members are happy (gratified) using the medium to transmit relevant information such as notice of meetings, wedding invitation, naming ceremonies, burial etc., among themselves. This facilitates communication and mobilization of members for necessary actions.

Hypotheses

To further guide this study, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

Null Hypothesis I

The social media has not really been impactful in NULGE's pursuit of welfare of members.

Null Hypothesis II

Members of NULGE are not very active in the social media in terms of information transmission.

Test of hypotheses

Hypothesis I"The social media has not really been impactful in NULGE's pursuit of welfare of members".

In order to test hypothesis 1, the following questions were raised:

1. Are you on Facebook or WhatsApp? Yes No
2. Do you make use of Facebook and orWhatsApp always? Yes. No
3. NULGE's activities on Facebook and WhatsApp has really helped in many ways to achieve the objectives of the union. Yes. No
4. Nonpayment of salaries as at when due and payment of incomplete salaries is the reason why most workers cannot own an android phone and even to subscribe. Yes No

Hypothesis II "Members of NULGE are not very active in the social media in terms of information transmission".

To also test hypothesis II, the following questions were raised:

1. Does NULGE as a union have a WhatsApp or Facebook chat group?
2. Do you own an Android phone? Yes No
3. Do you always subscribe for data to enable you to be active on Facebook or WhatsApp? Yes. 64-72
4. Is NULGE executive (local and state) always transmitting relevant information to members through Facebook or WhatsApp? Yes. No

Data Presentation and Analysis

Tables, figures and percentages are used to present and describe the responses from NULGE members. Thus, the first four questions which were raised to test hypothesis one have the answers presented in tables 2, 3, 4 and 5 respectively.

Table 2: Showing the responses from respondents to the question that says "Are you on Facebook or WhatsApp?"

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents		P e r c e n t a g e (%)		
Y e s	6	0	3		0
N o	1	4	0	7	0
T o t a l	2	0	0	1	0

Table 2 above reveals that, out of 200 employees of the local government 60, representing 30 percent of the sample size are on Facebook or WhatsApp. While 140, representing 70 percent is not.

Table 3: Showing the responses to the question that says "Do you make use of Facebook and or WhatsApp always?"

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents		P e r c e n t a g e (%)		
Y e s	4	0	2		0
N o	1	6	0	8	0
T o t a l	2	0	0	1	0

Table 3 shows that 40 employees, representing 20 percent are active on the media as against 160 employees, representing 80 percent is not on Facebook or WhatsApp.

Table 4: Shows responses to the statement that "NULGE's activities on Facebook and WhatsApp has really helped in many ways to achieve the objectives of the union".

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents		P e r c e n t a g e (%)		
Y e s	5	0	2		5
N o	1	5	0	7	5
T o t a l	2	0	0	1	0

From the table above, it can be seen that, 50 which is 25 percent of the employees agreed that NULGE's activities on Facebook and WhatsApp has really helped in many ways to achieve the objectives of the union, while 150 representing 75 percent of the employees disagreed.

Table 5: Nonpayment of salaries as at when due and payment of incomplete salaries is the reason why most workers cannot own an android phone and even to subscribe.

Table 5: Nonpayment of salaries as at when due and payment of incomplete salaries is the reason why most workers cannot own an android phone and even to subscribe.

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents		P e r c e n t a g e (%)		
Y e s	1	9	0	9	5
N o	1		0	5	
T o t a l	2	0	0	1	0

Table 5 above indicates that 190 employees attribute their inability to own android phones and to subscribe for data, to delay in salary payment and that, even when salaries are paid, workers receive incomplete salaries. This number represents 95 percent of the population. On the other hand, only 10 employees which represents 5 percent disagreed. Supporting this position, Ebegbulem (2010, 64-72 asserts:"Local government allocations are sometimes delayed or withheld which results in their inability to execute important projects in the community"Ebegbulem maintains that "It is always difficult to generate enough funds internally for the execution of ...projects"

As stated previously, tables 6, 7, 8 and 9 provide the answers to questions raised to test hypothesis II

Table 6: Showing responses to the question that says "Does NULGE as a union have a WhatsApp chat group?"

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Y e s	186	93
N o	4	2
I D o n ' t K n o w	10	5
T o t a l	200	100

The above table indicates that 186 employees are aware of the fact that NULGE as a union has a WhatsApp group chat. This represents 93 of the population. Also, 4 respondents answered "NO" while 10 do not know whether NULGE has a WhatsApp platform or not. These represent 2 percent and 5 percent of the employees, respectively.

Table 7: Shows responses to the question that says "Do you own an Android phone?"

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Y e s	65	32.5
N o	135	67.5
T o t a l	200	100

Clearly, table 7 above reveals that out of a total of 200 employees, 65 representing 32.5 percent, own android phones while 135 of the workers which is 67.5 percent of the employees do not own android phones.

Table 8: indicates responses to the following question. "Do you always subscribe for data to enable you to be active on Facebook or WhatsApp?"

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Y e s	40	20
N o	160	80
T o t a l	200	100

The responses in table 8 above shows that only 40 employees out of 200, meaning, 20 percent can afford to subscribe for data always, to keep them active on social media whereas majority which is 80 percent, representing 160 employees cannot to subscribe for data always. Consequently, they are not active on the NULGE WhatsApp platform.

Table 9: shows the responses to the question that says "Is NULGE executive (local and state) always transmitting relevant information to members through Facebook or WhatsApp?"

R e s p o n s e	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Y e s	186	93
N o	4	2
I D o n ' t K n o w	10	5

T	o	t	a	l	2	0	0	1	0	0
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The responses in table 9 above indicates that 186 workers of the local government, representing 93 percent of the population under study agreed that NULGE EXCO actually transmits relevant information 64-72 bers through WhatsApp. 4 which represents 2 percent of the population said "No" while 10 of the workers which is 5 percent does not now whether NULGE EXCO transmits relevant information to members through WhatsApp.

Analysis of Interview

In addition to the questionnaire analyzed above, semi structured interview was also conducted. Particularly, the NULGE Executive members were interviewed by asking them the following questions.

Question one: "Has the social media, particularly, WhatsApp or Facebook, helped the union to really achieve its aims and objectives in terms of enhancing employees' welfare?"

Responding to the above question, the NULGE Chairman at the State level made it clear that "as far as the communication between us and management is concerned, we hardly communicate through the social media because they tend to ignore our requests". As a result, we always resort to "interface"- meeting them one on one. The Chairman however, quickly pointed out that between the NULGE executive and the employees, they make use of WhatsApp in particular, to transmit relevant information such as notice of Congress, death of members, wedding ceremonies, etc, to members.

Question two: "Why is it that most of the local government employees don't own android phones in order to participate in the social media communication?"

Responding, one of the executive members replied by attributing the inability of workers to buy android phones to failure on the part of management to pay staff salaries regularly and completely. The respondent also attributes the problem to high level of illiteracy and ignorance of the workers at the local level.

Discussion of Findings

From the data presented and analyzed above, it is clear that the Nigerian Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE), is active on the social media; especially on WhatsApp platform. The investigation also, however, reveals that the level of participation of members is quite low. As clearly indicated in table 7 above, that, out of a total of 200 employees, 65 representing 32.5 percent, own android or smart phones while 135 of the workers which is 67.5 percent of the employees do not own android or smart phones.

In addition, about 95 percent of the population attributes their inability to own android phones to irregularities in the payment of salaries as shown in table 5. In light of this, Ebegbulem (2010, p94) states "Local government officials (management) enrich themselves with funds meant for the development of the local government" including staff development. Clearly therefore, most of the employees of the local government cannot afford to buy and use smart or android phones due to poverty resulting from nonpayment of salaries as at when due. It was also revealed from the study that, even when workers are paid salaries, they hardly receive complete salaries. Supporting this assertion, Itodo (2019) reports that "Civil servants and pensioners in Kogi state are groaning over unpaid salaries and pensions by the state and local governments, a situation which has put many of them in tight corner". Itodo further points out that " At the local level, the situation of council workers and primary school teachers is more worrisome as they have been receiving their pay in percentages over the years. Some received as modest as 17 percent of the old minimum wage as their monthly salary, thus resulting in a situation whereby their take-home pay could not take them home, literally "(Daily Trust, June 29, 2019).

In the quest to further investigate the challenges faced by NULGE in the course of using the social media, the NULGE executive members revealed that the use of WhatsApp in

particular, is more impactful, in terms of usage, between the executive of the union and members. However, between the Union and the Management of the local government and that of the state government, it was discovered that the use of WhatsApp is not quite effective, because, management tends to ignore important messages, especially messages that are in favour of the union.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the role of social media in trade unionism cannot be over emphasized. Trade unions, use the social media- Facebook, WhatsApp, internet, Twitter etc., not only to transmit relevant information among members but through the social media, the union executive also communicate with management, in course of agitating for their welfare. However, NULGE as a trade union has its own peculiar challenges in using the social media. Most of the employees of the local governments in Kogi state cannot afford to buy smart, android and other sophisticated phones that are required for active participation in the social media. From the research findings, one of the major challenges is nonpayment of salaries as at when due, as well as payment of salaries in percentages, instead of full salaries. In addition, management tends to ignore some relevant information transmitted to them by NULGE executive, consequently, NULGE executive often resort to face to face meeting with management unlike with employees.

Recommendations

Based on the findings above, the following recommendations are made in order to enhance more participation of local government employees in the social media, with specific reference the Kogi State local government workers.

1. The NULGE executive should enlighten members on the relevance of social media to the union and the need to participate in it.
2. The union should intensify its efforts on the management to pay workers' salaries on time, and let the management endeavour to pay full salaries instead of paying in percentages.

Further research

The researcher wishes to recommend that the level of ICT and computer literacy on the part of the local government employees is worth investigating, apart from the fact that the employees lack the funds to purchase smart or android phones.

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