



A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNICATION MODES AND THEIR RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN NEW MEDIA PRACTICES

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the often-overlooked relationship between Nigeria's indigenous communication systems and contemporary new media practices. While scholarship has extensively documented the rise of digital platforms in Nigeria, limited attention has been paid to how traditional communication modes continue to shape, influence, and even manifest within modern digital spaces. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of cultural studies and medium theory, this study employs a qualitative analytical approach to explore the enduring relevance of indigenous communication methods—such as town criers, oral storytelling, market square gatherings, and communal decision-making—in the age of Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook. The paper argues that contemporary Nigerian new media practices are not a complete break from the past but rather represent a technological reincarnation of deep-rooted cultural communication patterns. Through comparative analysis, the study reveals striking parallels between traditional communication functions and modern digital interactions, including community building, information verification, crisis communication, and social mobilisation. The findings suggest that understanding these cultural continuities is essential for effective communication planning, development communication, and media education in Nigeria. The researcher concludes by recommending the integration of indigenous communication knowledge into new media curriculum and practice, arguing that culturally rooted communication strategies are more likely to achieve meaningful engagement and sustainable behavioural change among Nigerian audiences.

Keywords: Indigenous communication, new media, Nigerian culture, town crier, digital practices, cultural continuity

Introduction

Long before the advent of television, radio, or the internet, Nigerian communities developed sophisticated communication systems that served their social, political, and cultural needs. The town crier moving through villages at dawn, the talking drum relaying messages across distances, the elders gathering under the sacred tree to deliberate on community matters, the moonlight tales that taught morals and preserved history—these were not mere entertainment or simple information transmission (Fab-Ukozor & Etumnu, 2022). They were complex communication ecosystems that built consensus, preserved culture, resolved conflicts, and maintained social order.

Today, Nigeria boasts one of Africa's most vibrant new media landscapes. With over 100 million internet users and burgeoning social media engagement, platforms like Twitter (now X), WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook have become primary arenas for public discourse, political mobilisation, business transactions, and social interaction (Okoro et al., 2019). The typical Nigerian now receives news, engages in debates, maintains relationships, and even conducts business through digital platforms. The contrast between the village square and the Twitter timeline appears stark, suggesting a revolutionary break in how Nigerians communicate.

But is this break as complete as it appears? This paper argues that beneath the surface of technological transformation, deep cultural patterns of communication persist and continue to shape how Nigerians use new media. The town crier, seemingly extinct, finds new life in the WhatsApp group administrator who disseminates community information. The village square gathering manifests in Facebook group discussions. The oral storytelling tradition continues through Instagram video content and TikTok narratives. The communal verification of information, once done through village assemblies—now plays out in the comment sections where users collectively fact-check and debate.

This study, therefore, seeks to bridge a significant gap in communication scholarship. While researchers have extensively documented both indigenous communication systems and new media practices in Nigeria, few have explored the connections between them. Understanding these connections is not merely an academic exercise. For development communicators seeking to promote health behaviours, for political communicators aiming to mobilise voters, for marketers trying to reach consumers, and for educators shaping the next generation of communicators, recognising the cultural roots of contemporary media behaviour is essential for effectiveness.

The central research question guiding this inquiry is: In what ways do indigenous Nigerian communication modes continue to manifest within, shape, and explain contemporary new media practices? By answering this question, the paper aims to contribute to a more culturally grounded understanding of Nigerian digital communication and to offer practical insights for communication practitioners.

Literature Review

This section reviews existing scholarship on indigenous communication systems, the evolution of new media in Nigeria, and the theoretical perspectives that help bridge these two domains.

Understanding Indigenous Communication Systems

Indigenous communication refers to the traditional, locally rooted modes of information sharing that existed in African societies before colonial intervention and the introduction of mass media. Wilson (2005) defines indigenous communication as the forms of communication that are native to a particular people, rooted in their culture, and utilised for information dissemination within their social context. These systems are characterised by their oral nature, their integration with community life, their reliance on human interaction, and their deep cultural embeddedness.

Nigerian indigenous communication took many forms. The town crier (often called *onyenkwa* in Igbo, *jakadiya* in Hausa, or *akigbe* in Yoruba) served as the official information disseminator, moving through communities with messages from village heads or councils. The talking drum, particularly among the Yoruba, conveyed complex messages across distances by mimicking the tonal patterns of speech. Oral storytelling during moonlight gatherings transmitted history, morals, and cultural values across generations. Market squares functioned as communication hubs where travellers brought news from distant places. Age-grade meetings, secret society gatherings, and kinship assemblies all served specific communication functions within their cultural contexts.

Okunna (2002) emphasises that these indigenous systems were not primitive or inferior to modern media. Rather, they were highly effective within their contexts, achieving high credibility, immediate feedback, and deep community engagement. Information from the town crier, for instance, carried the weight of traditional authority and was rarely questioned. The participatory nature of village meetings ensured that communication was dialogic rather than monologic.

The New Media Revolution in Nigeria

The new media landscape in Nigeria has experienced explosive growth over the past two decades. The country's internet penetration has grown from virtually nothing in the 1990s to over 100 million users today (NCC, 2023). Smartphone adoption has accelerated this growth, making internet access increasingly affordable and widespread. Social media platforms have become central to Nigerian life, with WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (X) being particularly dominant.

Scholars have extensively documented the impact of these platforms (Obayi et al., 2024). Oyero and Salawu (2018) examine how Nigerian youth use social media for political engagement. Chukwu and Nwachukwu (2020) explore the role of WhatsApp in facilitating business communication. Apuke and Tunca (2019) analyse the spread of misinformation on Nigerian social media. This scholarship has established that new media have transformed everything from journalism and politics to commerce and personal relationships in Nigeria.

However, much of this scholarship adopts a technological determinist perspective, focusing on what the technology does to society rather than how society appropriates technology. The implicit assumption is that new media represent a complete departure from the past, bringing entirely new communication patterns. This assumption, this paper argues, overlooks the cultural continuities that shape how Nigerians actually use these platforms.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives that illuminate the relationship between indigenous communication and new media.

Cultural Studies Theory, particularly as articulated by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School, provides the first lens. Cultural studies emphasises that media consumption is not a passive process but an active one in which audiences decode messages through their cultural frameworks. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model suggests that meaning is not simply transmitted but is produced through the interaction between the message and the receiver's cultural context. Applied to this study, cultural studies helps explain why Nigerians use new media in culturally specific ways they are decoding digital technologies through indigenous cultural frameworks that shape their expectations, interpretations, and uses of these platforms.

Medium Theory, associated with Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis, provides the second lens. McLuhan's (1964) famous dictum "the medium is the message" suggests that the characteristics of a communication medium shape how information is perceived and processed more than the content itself. Innis (1951) distinguished between time-biased media (which emphasise durability and tradition) and space-biased media (which emphasise extension across distance). This framework is particularly useful for understanding how indigenous communication systems (time-biased, emphasising community and continuity) interact with new media (space-biased, emphasising speed and reach). The encounter between these media types creates unique hybrid communication forms.

Together, these theories provide a framework for understanding that communication technologies are never culturally neutral. They are always appropriated, interpreted, and used within specific cultural contexts that shape their social impact.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, conceptual methodology appropriate for a position paper of this nature. The study employs comparative historical analysis, drawing on existing ethnographic studies of Nigerian indigenous communication, contemporary research on Nigerian new media practices, and theoretical literature from cultural and media studies.

The analytical approach involves several stages. First, the paper identifies key characteristics and functions of major indigenous communication modes in Nigeria based on documented ethnographic research. Second, it examines contemporary new media practices in Nigeria, drawing on recent empirical studies and observable social media trends. Third, it conducts a comparative analysis, identifying parallels, continuities, and transformations between indigenous and new media practices. Finally, it synthesises these findings into a coherent argument about cultural continuity in Nigerian digital communication.

This methodology is appropriate for a study aiming to advance a theoretical argument and generate hypotheses for future empirical research rather than to test specific hypotheses with primary data.

Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the core analytical argument of the paper, organised around key parallels between indigenous and new media communication practices in Nigeria.

The Town Crier and the WhatsApp Group Administrator

The town crier was a figure of considerable authority in traditional Nigerian communities. Typically appointed by the village council or traditional ruler, the crier bore the responsibility of disseminating official information announcements of meetings, warnings of impending dangers, proclamations of festivals, and notifications of deaths or births. The crier's message carried the weight of community authority and was generally accepted as truthful. Importantly, the crier was embedded in the community, known to all, and accountable to the traditional leadership.

The WhatsApp group administrator, particularly in community-based groups, performs remarkably similar functions. In countless Nigerian WhatsApp groups organised around villages, hometown associations, family networks, or professional communities, the administrator serves as the primary information gatekeeper. When important news needs to reach the community, a death announcement, a meeting invitation, a security alert, it is often the administrator who disseminates it. Like the town crier, the administrator is typically a known figure within the community, and their messages carry a degree of authority that ordinary members' posts do not. The group's rules, enforced by the administrator, parallel the traditional norms that governed the town crier's role.

This is not mere coincidence. The WhatsApp group has become the digital village square, and the administrator has inherited the town crier's communicative function. The technology is new, but the social role is ancient. Development communicators who understand this parallel might more effectively reach communities by working through trusted WhatsApp administrators rather than relying solely on mass media campaigns.

The Village Square and the Facebook Group

The village square or market square was the traditional public sphere of Nigerian communities. It was where people gathered to deliberate on matters of common concern, where disputes were settled, where information was verified, and where community consensus was formed. The square was characterised by

its openness (though often with gendered and age-based participation norms), its oral interactive nature, and its role in community building.

The Facebook group, particularly those organised around geographic communities or shared identities, serves analogous functions. Here, community members gather virtually to discuss issues affecting them, to share information, to debate, and sometimes to reach collective decisions. The comment threads become the new market square conversations. The group's timeline becomes the new meeting space. While the technology enables participation across distances that the physical square could never accommodate, the communicative functions remain strikingly similar.

Importantly, the social dynamics of the Facebook group often mirror those of the village square. Certain voices carry more weight based on their offline community standing. Elders' opinions are treated with deference. Consensus-building processes, though complicated by the medium, remain the goal of many discussions. The digital space has not replaced the village square so much as extended it.

Oral Storytelling and Digital Content Creation

Oral storytelling was perhaps the most pervasive indigenous communication form in Nigeria. Through folktales, proverbs, riddles, and historical narratives, elders educated the young, preserved cultural memory, and reinforced social norms. The moonlight taleakukon'ilo in Igbo, was a cherished institution where children gathered to hear stories that entertained while teaching moral lessons.

Contemporary Nigerian digital content creation bears the unmistakable imprint of this oral tradition. The popularity of skit makers on Instagram and YouTube reflects a culture that values narrative entertainment. Comedians like Mr Macaroni, Taaoma, and others have built massive followings by creating short, humorous narratives that often carry moral lessons or social commentary, essentially digital moonlight tales. The comment sections where viewers discuss these skits parallel the interactive, participatory nature of traditional storytelling sessions.

Furthermore, the Nigerian preference for video and audio content over text-based communication reflects the oral culture's enduring influence. While written communication has its place, Nigerians consistently show higher engagement with oral and visual content that more closely approximates the interpersonal, embodied communication of indigenous traditions.

Collective Information Verification and Digital Comment Culture

In traditional Nigerian communities, information was rarely accepted uncritically. When news arrived from outside, it was typically brought before the community assembly where elders would question the messenger, compare the information with what others knew, and collectively determine its credibility. This collective verification process protected the community from misinformation and maintained trust in the information system.

The comment section on Nigerian social media has become the digital equivalent of this verification assembly. When news breaks or controversial information circulates, Nigerian users flock to the comments not merely to express opinions but to collectively interrogate the information. Users challenge sources, provide alternative perspectives, share personal knowledge, and collectively construct an understanding of what is true. The process is messy, often contentious, and sometimes descends into abuse, but it represents a digital manifestation of the communal verification instinct.

This cultural pattern has significant implications for understanding misinformation in Nigeria. While misinformation certainly spreads, the collective verification culture also provides a built-in corrective

mechanism. Users who simply broadcast unverified information are often publicly challenged and corrected. The community, not just the individual, participates in determining credibility.

Age-Grade Meetings and Digital Networks

Traditional Nigerian societies organised themselves through age-grades—cohorts of individuals born within the same period who moved through life stages together, maintaining bonds and collective responsibilities. Age-grades provided social support, organised community labour, settled disputes among members, and maintained social cohesion.

Contemporary digital networks, particularly WhatsApp groups organised around graduation sets, professional cohorts, or age-based associations, perform remarkably similar functions. The "Set '99" group, the "NYSC Batch A 2015" WhatsApp platform, the "Department of Broadcasting Alumni" Facebook page, these digital spaces maintain the age-grade's functions of mutual support, information sharing, and social bonding. Members celebrate achievements together, mourn losses collectively, mobilise support for those in need, and maintain connections across geographic distances.

The technology enables these networks to persist far beyond the geographic and temporal limits of traditional age-grades, but the underlying social logic remains the same. Nigerians are not simply using digital tools to network; they are recreating ancient social structures in digital form.

Theoretical Synthesis: Cultural Continuity in Technological Change

What explains these striking parallels between indigenous and new media communication practices? The theoretical framework provides answers. From a cultural studies perspective, Nigerians are actively decoding digital technologies through indigenous cultural frameworks. The technology presents certain affordances, but how people actually use it is shaped by deeply internalised cultural patterns, expectations about authority, community, information, and social interaction that predate digital media by centuries.

From a medium theory perspective, the encounter between time-biased indigenous communication (rooted in oral tradition, community, and continuity) and space-biased new media (enabling speed and distance) creates hybrid forms. These hybrids retain indigenous communication's cultural depth while leveraging new media's technological reach. The result is not the replacement of the old by the new but their integration into culturally specific communication practices.

This analysis has significant implications. It suggests that technological change in communication is never as revolutionary as it appears. Deep cultural patterns persist, shaping how new technologies are appropriated and used. It also suggests that effective communication in Nigeria must be culturally grounded. Messages and channels that resonate with indigenous communication patterns are more likely to achieve meaningful engagement than those imported from other cultural contexts.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has argued that contemporary Nigerian new media practices are not a complete departure from the past but rather represent the technological reincarnation of deep-rooted indigenous communication modes. Through comparative analysis, it has revealed striking parallels between traditional communication forms, the town crier, village square, oral storytelling, collective verification, and age-grade networks and their digital counterparts in WhatsApp groups, Facebook communities, Instagram content, comment sections, and alumni networks. These parallels demonstrate the persistence of cultural patterns in shaping how Nigerians communicate, even as the technological medium changes.

The study contributes to communication scholarship by bridging the artificial divide between indigenous communication studies and new media research. It demonstrates that understanding Nigeria's communication present requires understanding its communication past. The cultural frameworks that shaped indigenous communication continue to shape how Nigerians decode and use digital technologies. Based on this analysis, the paper offers the following recommendations:

For Communication Educators: The curriculum in Nigerian communication and media studies should integrate indigenous communication systems as more than historical artefacts. Students should be taught to recognise how indigenous patterns manifest in contemporary media and to design culturally resonant communication strategies. Courses in new media should include modules on cultural continuity in digital practices.

For Development Communicators: Health campaigns, agricultural extension programmes, and other development interventions should leverage the parallels identified in this study. Working through WhatsApp group administrators (the digital town criers), engaging Facebook communities (the digital village squares), and using narrative formats (the digital storytelling) will likely achieve greater reach and impact than mass media campaigns designed without cultural sensitivity.

For Communication Researchers: This paper's arguments should be tested through empirical research. Studies could examine how specific communities use digital platforms in culturally patterned ways, how information verification actually unfolds in Nigerian comment sections, and how traditional authority structures manifest in digital spaces. Cross-cultural comparative research could illuminate what is specifically Nigerian versus what reflects broader African or global patterns.

For Policymakers: Digital inclusion policies should recognise that access to technology is not enough. Citizens must be able to use digital platforms in ways that align with their cultural communication patterns. Policies that impose external communication models without considering indigenous patterns are likely to fail.

For Platform Designers: Understanding that Nigerian users bring specific cultural expectations to digital platforms could inform design decisions. Features that support community verification, narrative content, and group-based interaction may be particularly valuable in the Nigerian context.

In conclusion, the journey from town crier to Twitter is not a journey from the primitive to the modern but a journey of cultural adaptation and continuity. The town crier's voice echoes still, not in the village streets but in WhatsApp notifications. The village square persists, not under the sacred tree but in Facebook group discussions. The moonlight tales continue, not around evening fires but through Instagram videos. Understanding this cultural continuity is essential for anyone who seeks to communicate effectively with Nigerian audiences, whether for commerce, development, politics, or community building. The medium has changed, but the cultural patterns that give communication its meaning endure.

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