



# CODESRIA

**12th General Assembly**  
Governing the African Public Sphere

**12e Assemblée générale**  
Administrer l'espace public africain

**12a Assembleia Geral**  
Governar o Espaço Público Africano

ةي عمجل ةي مومعلا ةي ناثلا رشع  
حكم الفضاء العام الإفريقي

## **Whose Deliberative Democracy? A Critique of Online Public Discourses in Africa**

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07-11/12/2008  
Yaoundé, Cameroun

A legitimate decision does not represent the will of all, but is one that results from the deliberation of all. It is the process by which everyone's will is formed that confers its legitimacy on the outcome, rather than the sum of already formed wills (Habermas, 1989: 446).

## **Introduction**

In September 2004, President Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin who claimed to be pursuing a political reforms agenda suddenly abolished gubernatorial elections in Russia. This action compromised the right of Russians to elect their regional leaders. Against the background of the previously held view that Russians were strongly committed to democratic values (e.g. Colton and McFaul, 2001), an opinion poll was immediately conducted to gauge the people's perception of this "authoritarian turn". Shockingly, 44% of the respondents supported the step taken by Putin while 42% opposed it (see Jack, 2004). The paradoxical situation was made possible by the fact that public support for the Russian elite was at a very low ebb as a result of the latter's penchant for "crony capitalism". The Russian political elite is corrupt, self-seeking and has no strong links with the ordinary citizens. The situation in Africa is, however, worse. While the situation in Russia has to do with the misuse of power in Russia, the loaded and more serious problem in Africa is that many of the public office holders in the continent are usurpers. They came to power via dubious political processes. There is therefore often no social contract between these politicians and the "maddening crowd" they claim to represent.

The kind of situation presented above undermines state legitimacy and the credibility of the elites in two ways. First and foremost, the elite's claims to state power are questioned and its authority is undermined by individuals and groups that consider themselves to have been shortchanged. Secondly, the "dirty" revelations and cantankerous claims made by members of the elite against one another in this kind of unhealthy political atmosphere spirals down into popular attitudes and beliefs about state capacity and legitimacy. This de-legitimization of the ruling elite and the political processes that produce and reproduce it leads to different types of problems and responses, including resort to self-help strategies by citizens, decreasing voter turnout during elections as a result of declining trust in the electoral process, proliferation of human rights and humanitarian civil society organizations, and misuse of state powers by law enforcement agents.

No other cluster of events in recent years demonstrates the nature of this crisis situation as the events surrounding the 2007/2008 elections in Nigeria, Kenya and Zimbabwe. The elections, and how the disputes resulting from them were handled, testify readily to the fact that the ruling class and the people of the continent have contradictory attitudes and commitment to electoral democracy in Africa. In the three cases, the people flocked out to vote for candidates of their choice; they conducted themselves in an orderly manner. But the outcomes of the elections did not reflect popular expectations. Many problems result from this kind of scenario. One of these problems is that many of the public office holders in the three countries today do not enjoy the kind of domestic and international legitimacy needed for promoting political stability on the African continent.

“Legitimacy” as used here refers to “a capacity of the system to engender and maintain the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for the society” (Lipset, 1963, quoted in Ansell, 2001:8705). This definition calls attention to two important facts. The first is that legitimacy is about people’s beliefs about rulers and institutions. It is also about claims made by rulers. Thus Beetham (1991: 11) posits that “a given power relationship is not legitimate because people believe in its legitimacy but because it can be justified in terms of their beliefs” (quoted in Ansell, 2001: 8705).

Two strategic conflict management approaches are being used to deal with the election disputes in the three countries named above. In Nigeria, the disputes (at local, state and national levels) are being looked into by election petition tribunals and appellate courts. In Kenya and Zimbabwe, facilitated dialogues are being promoted between the political opponents by international mediators. To the extent that all these approaches hardly involve the participation of the citizenry, it is clear that the conflict settlement approaches might not have much positive effect on the trust of the people in electoral democracy. How do we deal with this problem? How do we restore the confidence of the people in electoral democracy and discourage them from taking the law into their hands as witnessed in Kenya and Zimbabwe? How do we deal with the problem of political apathy in Nigeria? This paper argues that any efforts at reforming the democratic process in these countries must invigorate the public sphere inasmuch as the integrity of the state in the three cases has already been compromised. The notion of “deliberative democracy” provides some pointers towards this new thinking.

The present paper particularly explores the contributions that computer-mediated communication (online public sphere) can make to deliberative democracy in terms of enabling the subaltern class (the so-called ordinary citizenry) to participate in socio-political decision-making at the local and national levels beyond what is expected of their representatives in the parliament. However, the paper questions the value of this approach as a public discourse model in a developing society still grappling with the absence of the basic infrastructure, knowledge system and true commitment to democratic ethos. Four Nigerian websites are used to support some of the theoretical issues raised in the paper.

### **Political Economy of “Deliberative Democracy”**

The concept of “deliberative democracy”, also known as “discursive democracy”, was coined by Joseph M. Bessette in 1980 and further developed and popularized by a few other political theorists (most especially Jürgen Habermas) to denote any system of political decisions based on some tradeoff of consensus decision-making and representative democracy. The paradigm both queries and further strengthens the traditional notion of democracy. Whereas the traditional theory of democracy emphasizes the centrality of voting and parliamentary representation in democracy, deliberative democracy theorists are of the opinion that legitimate lawmaking resides basically in the public deliberation of the citizenry. It recognizes the existence of a conflict of interest between decision-makers in a society and the citizenry, and the mediation of this conflict involves an extensive outreach effort to include marginalized, isolated, ignored groups in the decision-making process. It focuses as much on the decision-making process as on the results and outcomes that emerge from it; and on the basis of this framework could be said to be a complete theory of civics.

There is still much disagreement among contemporary deliberative democrats about the details of their views. In an article contributed to the book, *The Good Polity*, Cohen (1989) tries to provide five main features of deliberative democracy that seem to have a wide application to the work of other scholars. He relates his postulations both to a characterization of the movement of political theorists who pursue the advancement of deliberative democracy as well as to an outline of the conditions of possibility that make for the actual praxis of deliberative democracy among citizens in a given civic space. His delineation can be summarized thus:

- An ongoing independent association with expected continuation. (This description relates more to the movement of political theorists advancing the idea of deliberative democracy.)
- The citizens in the democracy structure their institutions such that deliberation is the deciding factor in their civic behaviour and attitude, and they commit themselves to allowing deliberation to continue. (This is his characterization of the citizenry in a deliberative democracy.)
- A commitment to the respect of a pluralism of values and the broad spectrum of aims within the polity. (This applies to scholars, citizens, activists, and even the political class.)
- The participants in the democracy regard the deliberative procedure as the source of legitimacy and as such they also prefer that the causal histories of legitimation for each law be transparent and easily traceable back to the deliberative process. (This is a reiteration of the normative principles of the entire polity.)
- Each member and all members recognize and respect the fact they each and all have deliberative capacity. (This is a statement on the fundamental political human rights of the citizens in a deliberative democracy. It outlines the rules of engagement between citizens as well as pointing to how the mutual respect citizens have for each other's deliberative powers must compel the political elite to a recognition and respect of the same citizen rights and capacity.)

The core of the deliberativist program is said by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2004: 3) to be as follows:

Most fundamentally, deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives. Both are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another. In a democracy, leaders should therefore give reasons for their decisions, and respond to the reasons that citizen give in return.

A careful review of extant literature suggests readily that there is no agreement among deliberative democrats on what constitutes the “reasons” alluded to in the above statement. What seems to be clear to all, however, is that appeals to power or expressions of private interest do not count as “reasons”. As Gutmann and Thompson argue, the reasons in question

must be “accessible to all the citizens to whom they are addressed”; that is, “To justify imposing their will upon you, your fellow citizens must give reasons that are comprehensible to you. If you seek to impose your will on them, you own them no less” (2004, 4). They also observe that the deliberation atmosphere must be open and continual and not limited to a period or environment:

Although deliberation aims at justifiable decision, it does not presuppose that the decision at hand will in fact be justified, let alone that a justification today will suffice for the indefinite future. It keeps open the possibility of a continuing dialogue, one in which citizens can criticize previous decisions and move ahead on the basis of that criticism (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004: 6).

On the whole, deliberative democracy seems to place emphasis on the inevitability, collectiveness and constructiveness of public debate. It requires that people are able to raise tough governance questions and present their cases when they feel their interests are threatened by the self-seeking political behaviour of the ruling class. In other words, the process involves “constructive confrontation” – an approach that involves a combination of conflict strategies, dispute resolution and advocacy strategies for helping disputants to advance their interest with the expectation of win-win outcomes.

Deliberative democracy thrives best in an atmosphere of civility (see Burgess and Burgess, 1997). First and foremost, the people involved in the rational deliberation must be willing to separate people from problems. More energy must be channeled into dealing with the latter than the former. Each of the deliberants must recognize the fact that there are more opinions on the issue than the ones they represent and canvass. In order to make room for sincere consideration of the issues, there is the need to limit interpersonal misunderstandings. The deliberation process must be fair and easy to explain and decisions taken must be on the basis of substantive arguments. Parties must curtail their use of power options as a precondition for discussion and they must be rational and not just persuasive in their arguments. The deliberants must be willing to obtain relevant facts on the issues and be willing to resolve factual disagreements where possible. The reality must be faced that there are situations in which some factual disagreements cannot be resolved simply because of irreducible uncertainties associated with the limits of scientific enquiry. Therefore, an air of logical scepticism prevails even though the positive attitude of deliberation is governed by a

willingness to act in accordance with the best available knowledge. That is to say, the fact that a window is left open in public discourse over any matter does not impose on political actors an inertia that defeats the very purpose of deliberation. Otherwise, it becomes a tool for academic dispute and not a procedure for directing and arriving at actions in civic space.

### **Rethinking the Public Sphere in Africa**

Deliberative democracy supports the public sphere. What are the challenges in Africa? The issues were aptly captured on 23 November 2004 by the Archbishop Emeritus of the Anglican Church, the Rt Rev. Desmond Mpilo Tutu, at the second Nelson Mandela Foundation Lecture. In the speech, the Reverend bemoaned the declining state of democracy in South Africa as a result of the increasing collapse of the public sphere.<sup>i</sup> The key issues raised in the lecture which later generated heated debate across the country were that:

- Members of the ANC have become "unthinking, uncritical, kowtowing party linetoeing, (with) many seemingly cowed and apparently intimidated to comply", which constitutes a threat to the very existence of our democracy; [Pls. take another look at this sentence.]
- Our party-list electoral system encourages this, as our members have deliberately chosen not to think and speak out critically, as this would endanger the incomes they earn as Members of Parliament, "opting (as mercenaries) for silence to become voting cattle for the party";
- There is absence of open debate in the country because some, presumably including the President of the Republic, "want to pull rank and to demand an uncritical, sycophantic, obsequious conformity".

The Archbishop ended the presentation by calling for vigorous public debate among South Africans on issues relating to HIV/AIDS, the South African government's approach to the issue of Zimbabwe, black economic empowerment, defence spending, and Basic Income Grant (BIG). He said: "We want our society to be characterized by vigorous debate and dissent where to disagree is part and parcel of a vibrant community, that we should play the ball not the person and not think that those who disagree, who express dissent, are ipso facto disloyal or unpatriotic."

Though targeted at South Africa and South Africans, the broad governance issues raised by Rev. Tutu above in the speech have a wide African application and implication. It is popular knowledge that most of the countries in the continent have no provisions for multi-issue democratic debate. This results from the selfish and sycophantic character of the elite class, most especially members of national parliaments whose responsibility it is to debate on and encourage the debate of critical national issues with a view to putting in place laws and policies that could alleviate the problems faced by people. The parliaments in the continent are in no doubt "unthinking, uncritical, kowtowing party linetoeing" as Tutu said of South Africa. Whereas in the other African countries the presidents selfishly control the parliamentarians, in Nigeria the parliamentarians are under the influence of a galaxy of undemocratic forces: the president and state governors, the ruling political parties, and individual godfathers. They lack any independence or the will as to engage in any critical-rational debate about the plight of the common citizen. We can see the evidence of this in some of the statements credited to Chris Uba, the former godfather of Anambra politics and the late Lamidi Adedibu, the godfather of politics in Oyo state, Nigeria:

**Statement 1:**

I AM THE GREATEST OF ALL GODFATHERS IN NIGERIA,

Because this is the first time one single individual has single handedly put in position every politician in a state.

- The State Governor and his deputy,
- The 3 Senators to represent the State at the National Assembly;
- 10 out of 11 members of the Federal House of Reps;
- twenty-nine (29) State House of Assembly members;

*I also have the power to remove any of them who does not perform up to my expectations anytime I like*<sup>ii</sup> — Chris Uba.

**Statement 2:**

I put Ladoja<sup>iii</sup> in office; he started his political career in my house and will end it in my house. I knew he was going to be a bad child, that's why I put in a deputy that is loyal to me — Chief Lamidi Adedibu.<sup>iv</sup>

**Statement 3:**

Ladoja is too greedy. He was collecting N65million as security vote every month. You know that governors don't account for security votes. He was to give me N15million of that every month. He reneged. Later it was reduced to N10 million, yet he did not give me<sup>v</sup>..... I put him there. So, if I demand money, will it be wrong?...He is not the first governor and he is not going to be the last. Other people who are going to take over from him have lined up now.<sup>vi</sup>

**Statement 4:**

There is nothing like ideology in Nigerian politics. Everybody only wants his daily bread — Chief Lamidi Adedibu.<sup>vii</sup>

The statements above are self-explanatory. They show clearly that the common citizen is completely detached from what is touted as “democracy” in contemporary Nigerian society (Albert, 2005, 2006, 2007). It is difficult under this kind of situation to expect the political class to be interested in any critical-rational debate about the conditions of the subaltern class.

It is an open secret in Nigeria that the parliamentarians at the three levels of government spend the best of their time ministering to their personal needs: increase in their allowances, inflation of the budgets presented to them by the executive in order to increase allocation to themselves, demanding for gratification before budgets and bills are approved, and claiming the rights to nominate contractors for projects to be executed by the executive arms of government. The success of the methods by which Nigerian legislators compromise their constitutional roles of legislation and representation is clearly evident in the fact that they were able in recent years to get the executive arm of government to pay them “Constituency Development Funds” (CDF). The money, which usually runs into hundreds of thousands of US dollars, is usually paid into the personal accounts of the lawmakers.

The argument given to support this anomaly is that by paying the legislators this huge of amount of money, “dividends of democracy” would get to their constituencies where projects are expected to be designed and implemented. The assumption here is that the legislators have to personally do the projects because the government would not do them. However, the situation indicts the lawmakers. What they are saying in essence is that they lack the capacity to make the executive implement projects in their communities. Yet they are able to get the

same executive arm of government to pay some money into their personal accounts for running projects in their communities. The editorial of *ThisDay* newspaper of August 1, 2008 on the matter is interesting for its take on this issue:

Our lawmakers are leaving their major responsibility of lawmaking to chase contract awards and project execution in their constituencies. Law making is serious business and we believe that if the lawmakers take their jobs seriously, the executive arms of government would take them seriously and there would be no option for the latter than to ensure even spread of projects across the geo-political zones.

The editorial of *Business Day* (June 12, 2008) also raised some critical questions:

How are the projects which will attract funding from this account to be determined? Who will be the contactors and how will projects be prosecuted with the legislators compromising their positions... What happened to the funds appropriated in the past?

Professor Ladipo Adamolekun has tried to answer the last question. He observes that a large chunk of what is allocated to the parliamentarians in the past as “Constituency Development Funds” (CDF) either went into private purses or were spent on projects that were later abandoned because of their infeasibility: “the proportion of CDFs that is not used by individual legislators either to assure their exit from the ranks of the poor or increase their personal wealth would have been spent on what would become abandoned projects” (Adamolekun, 2008:17). Each senator in Nigeria gets about \$1 million for their community projects while on the average members of State Houses of Assembly get about \$100,000. The size of the money, and the related largesse that parliamentarians and other politicians secure for themselves, makes political offices attractive to many Nigerians and partly accounts for the violence that characterize electoral processes in the country. It also accounts for why many parliamentarians find it difficult to perform their oversight functions over the executive arms of government having been deliberately compromised by the executive arms of government at the federal, state and local government levels.

Kenya, according to Adamolekun, was the first developing nation in the world to introduce CDF in 2003. He notes that a large chunk of what the legislators get on behalf of their constituencies is used to further sabotage democratic processes: “...in Kenya, MPs use CDFs

to buy votes to assure re-election; in Uganda where CDF law was passed in 2007, only 3 out of 319 legislators had accounted for their \$6,000 CDF by due date...CDF must be seen for what they truly are: an aberration that has been embraced by countries that are characterized, in varying degrees, by bad governance practices” (Ibid.). In Nigeria, the nation’s financial wealth is stashed away in Swiss bank accounts or spent on “primitive accumulation of votes” (Ibeanu 2007:49-63) or utilized to the end of financing physical, psychological, and structural violence (Albert 2007b).

### **Deliberative Democracy, the Media and Public Sphere**

The simple point we have tried to make above is that the values and attitudes of legislators in different parts of Africa put under question the entire notion of representative democracy on the continent. This makes it compelling for citizens to start seeking other ways of representing their interests in governance. This is where the role of the media becomes very crucial in reinvigorating the public sphere.

Contemporary theories of deliberative democracy and the public sphere celebrate the role of the media in facilitating or hindering decision-making in a democracy. In most cases, some strategic questions are usually asked around the question of inclusion in the deliberation process: *who* should participate, *what* should be the (ideal) content of their contributions to public discourse, *how* are ideas to be presented (medium, mode, style, etc.), and what are the desirable *outcomes* of the discourse process (i.e. the relationship between discourse and the decision-making that is sought or feared). Different democratic traditions answer these questions differently. With respect to the question of who should participate, the representative liberal theory values the participation of experts and representatives of the citizens, whereas all other traditions (participatory liberal, discursive, and constructionist) value the inclusion of the citizens (Yetim and Turoff, 2004:239).

Debates on deliberative democracy and the public sphere tilt more towards the inclusion of the citizens in the discussions. It places heavy emphasis on popular participation. For example, Habermas’ conception of the normative notion of the public sphere is a social environment in which citizens are willing to and can freely exchange views on issues of political concern. With a view to calling vivid attention to what is required in such a setting, Habermas alludes to the situation in 17th- and 18th-century Europe during which coffee houses, societies and salons were centres for public discourse. People of different creeds and

social statuses came together to discuss matters of importance to the common good. He likened the normative notion of the public sphere in the contemporary world to this old tradition.

In his attempt to illustrate his perspective on the issue, Habermas differentiated between the early press which sincerely placed emphasis on political controversy and the modern press which commodify news and by so doing raises questions as to its credibility. He argues that the press in the 17th century “was for the first time established as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate: as the fourth estate” (Habermas 1989:60). For example in the US, the media by this time did not take sides with either the loyalists or patriots. Rather the media put its best into pursuing the truth (Schudson, quoted in Calhoun 1993:154). This historical situation is in contrast to modern day experiences in which public debate is far removed from the rational-critical debate idealized by Habermas. The contemporary traditional media (television, magazines and newspapers) engage in activities that question their capacity as sites for rational debate or political criticism. The more politicians invest in media publicity the better their chances of winning elections. Those who ignore the media, no matter how good they are, do so at their own peril. Topic selection by the media reflects the pressures of commercial and proprietorial interests. Debates are deliberately structured in a manner that makes extreme points of view clash to maximum effect. This increases media ratings but do little to contribute to the formation of discursive public will or opinion.

In his own work, Dahlgren (1995:66) observes that some media houses try to create an illusion of popular participation by having some audience participation programmes that provide a forum for groups which would otherwise have been excluded from public view to “exercise their democratic rights”. He argued that this access does not necessarily mean that power structures in society undergo any significant changes. The things done on such programmes might be merely aimed at generating data for reinforcing the preconceived agenda of the media house or the elite class they represent.

No matter its shortcomings, the traditional media remains one of the most reliable channels for ensuring and revitalizing the public sphere. It allows diverse social groups to ventilate their views and outline various alternative arguments and actions; it helps social movements to advertise their causes and seek popular support; and it helps groups and formations to get

feedback. These contributions of the media to the public sphere can be improved if this agency of democracy and democratization could “assist the realization of common objectives of society through agreement or compromise between conflicting interests. The media should contribute to this process by facilitating democratic procedures for resolving conflict and defining collectively agreed aims” (Curran 1991:103).

### **Online Public Discourses**

This paper differentiates between offline media discourses and online public discourses and focuses particularly on the latter whose main characteristic is the dissemination of information through the Internet. How well can the Internet be said to be an alternative site for public discourses? Answering this question would require us to compare the offline media discourses and online public discourses. The traditional media has three important attributes by which the use of the Internet can be assessed: (i) vast financial resources, research libraries, expertise and photographs (ii) established audiences willing to give credence to what is published, and (iii) established methods of distribution (Thornton, 2002:10). The Internet has the capacity to meet the three expectations and a lot is still being invested into ensuring that the Internet achieves even more than these.

The Internet is an explicit combination of transport, communication and power that would contribute significantly to the forging of a new era of participatory democracy and a revitalization of the public sphere. It has the potential of expanding knowledge and freedom, democratizing culture and eroding monopolies of knowledge. Howard Rheingold’s (1993) book, *Virtual Communities*, is one of the earliest to propagate this notion. Rheingold’s main argument is that “virtual communities could help citizens revitalize democracy, or they could be luring us into an attractively packaged substitute for democratic discourse” ( 276) and that “if properly understood and defended by enough citizens”, the Internet “does have democratizing potential in the way that alphabets and printing presses had democratizing potential” (page 279).

Some scholars have even argued that the Internet (“the superhighway”) can do more for democracy than the print media. For example, the Chicago School theorist Stallabrass (1995:18) argues in one of his works that “For those rugged, libertarian individuals who dare venture there, the realm of cyberspace will reactivate the lost magic of a mythological past. For Timothy Leary “...cyberpunks are the strong stubborn individuals who have inherited the

mantle of the early explorers, mavericks, ronin and freethinkers everywhere”. In one of his works, Carey (1989:148) describes the superhighway as “the story of the progressive liberation of the human spirit. More information is available and is made to move faster: ignorance is ended; civil strife is brought under control; and a beneficent future, moral and political as well as economic, is opened by the irresistible tendencies of technology”. The most politically sensitive statement about the potentials of the Internet for improving democracy was probably made by Vice President of the United States in 1994, Al Gore (1995:4) using the “information superhighway” metaphor:

The Global Information Infrastructure...will circle the globe with information superhighways on which all people can travel. These highways allow us to share information, to connect, and to communicate as a global community.

From these connections we will derive robust and sustainable economic progress, strong democracies, better solutions to global and local environmental challenge, improved health care, and –ultimately – a greater sense of shared stewardship of our small planet.

The GII (Global Information Infrastructure) will spread participatory democracy. In a sense, the GII will be a metaphor for democracy itself.

The opinion of Zoe Druick on the superhighway is as colourful as that of Al Gore. He too remarks that:

Highways are the new world paving its way towards the frontier. Highways are liberation, equality, mobility, autonomy, facility, connection, speed, communication, excitement...The irony in all this idealism around the highway is that we have all had the opposite experience: traffic jams, accidents, the disintegration of post-WWII infrastructures. The point is that the highway is part of a very old narrative of progress completely separate from our everyday experience of actually existing highways (Druick 1995).

The inclusion of the Internet as a site for the discourse that characterizes the public sphere is made possible on account of the work done by a few other scholars to reformulate and add to the original ideas about the public sphere (see Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 2001b; Sparks, 2001). One important addition to the theory, which is germane to some of the issues discussed

in this paper, is that there are multiple publics rather than one overarching public sphere (Asen and Brouwer, 2001; Dahlgren 2001; Fraser 1992). Garnham opposes the idea of “multiple publics” but comes up with a position that is not too far from it. He argues that only one overarching public sphere exists but that there may be other public spheres within it with “each organized around its own political structure, media systems, and sets of norms and interests” (Garnham 1992:371). The large number of people who use the Internet for various purposes makes the two positions canvassed above on multiple publics relevant here. In addition to catering for different stakeholders with different positions, interests and needs, the Internet is a combination of chat, Usenet, the World Wide Web, email and other protocols.

What the foregoing probably suggests is that not everything on the Internet constitutes the public sphere. Thus Dahlberg (2001) proposes six criteria that must be met before an online space can be considered a public sphere: autonomy from state and economic power; exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims; reflexivity; ideal role-taking; sincerity; and discursive inclusion and equality.

### **Online Subaltern Public Discourses in Nigeria**

What the foregoing tries to suggest is that the Internet has contributed significantly to the enlargement of 21st-century public sphere in terms of serving as a source of new range of voices in news provision and helping to compensate for the staggering failures on the part of the mainstream media which are increasingly corrupted by commercialism and state ownership – most especially in the developing world. The next issue to be raised is the extent to which these online websites can be said to have significantly contributed to deliberative democracy. With a view to generating necessary data for answering this question, four Nigerian websites have been examined. They are [www.saharareports.com](http://www.saharareports.com), [www.economicconfidential.com](http://www.economicconfidential.com), [www.againstbabangida.com](http://www.againstbabangida.com), and [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com). The four provide the opportunity for anybody to make contributions to the discussion of the problems facing Nigeria. Who actually participates in the process? Who gets left out?

[www.saharareporters.com](http://www.saharareporters.com): The role played by this website during the 2007 elections in Nigeria presents it as one of the most popular in Nigeria. Throughout the last election season (2006 and 2007) in Nigeria, the website sent mails to individuals and corporate organizations about the efforts being made by the political elite in the country to sabotage democratic processes.

So wide was the reach of the website that Olumhense (2008) observed in a feature article in *The Guardian* newspaper of August 10, 2008: “If you are a Nigerian, and literate, but have never heard of Sahara Reporters or been to its website, something must be seriously wrong”. Olumhense described SaharaReporters as “the face of Citizen Journalism” in the sense of providing Nigerians access to valuable information about their leaders and lifestyle with a view to making a contribution to the understanding of those leaders that the mainstream press and their ownership may be uncomfortable with. He characterized SaharanReporters as “Nigeria telling the truth to Nigeria. It is journalism by the people for the people”. The website particularly focuses on corruption.

The website lists names of some prominent Nigerians considered to be very corrupt; what they stole from the nation’s economy, their accomplices, and where the loots are hidden. The website also features stories of some prominent Nigerians believed to be involved in advance fee fraud cases around the world. A major contribution of the website is probably the deluge of information it provides on the levels of corrupt financial practices during the administration of Chief Olusegun Obasajo from 1999 to 2007.

The website also contains an e-library where people can download some official documents such as reports of probe panels, confidential letters exchanged between state officials, human rights reports (local and international). There is also a section for interviews conducted with some prominent Nigeria to shed light on some governance issues in the country. The most captivating section of the website is known as “Photonews”. This exhibits an array of photographs of some Nigerian state officials engaged in different types of unbecoming activities: some state officials (including the daughter of President Obasanjo – Senator Iyabo Obasanjo-Bello) smiling away their criminality and waving to their “supporters” as they were being taken to court for various cases of corrupt practices; the mansion of the present Minister for Justice which was said to have been bought for one million pounds and renovated with 300,000 pounds in Abuja; and President Yar’Adua escaping from some Nigerian protesters in London. One other picture features a former Acting Governor of Plateau – Michael Botmang – said to have stolen 1.6 billion in six months.

The website produces its own reports, hyperlinks reports from other Nigerian and foreign sources, and takes direct contributions from members of the public. Members of the public are expected to read the news reports and other items on the website, and discuss them.

[www.economicconfidential.com](http://www.economicconfidential.com): The second website is economicconfidential.com – a monthly. It was established in January 2007 by some seasoned journalists and writers who have watched and reported on the local economic and financial scenes in Nigeria for years but had to later turn to online publishing with a view to providing Nigerians with some behind-the-scene economic analyses as may never be done in any regular publication. In addition to featuring a varied kaleidoscope and indicators that measure the pulse of the economy, the site provides the opportunity for all major Nigerian dailies to be read.

Many of the articles published by the site pertain to the self-seeking behaviour of the Nigerian political elite. The three most interesting articles published on August 22, 2008 when the website was last visited by this author read (i) “New salaries and allowances for legislators” (ii) Dollar and duty tour allowances for legislators”, (iii) “EFCC: What manner of castration”. What the three articles are trying to say in essence is that Nigerian parliamentarians live in a world of their own and would do anything to ensure that the Nigerian economy exclusively serves them and that the government would also not mind investing all its resources into ensuring that the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), which was established to curb official corruptions, fails to achieve its objectives. Readers are challenged to discuss the reports.

[www.againstbabangida.com](http://www.againstbabangida.com): This is the third website. It is said to have been started by some “concerned citizens determined to help sustain the culture of democracy in Nigeria”. The website prides itself in “fighting dictatorship in Nigerian politics as symbolized by General Ibrahim Babangida (IBB) and, lately, General Olusegun Obasanjo”. Of course the main target is Babangida and the website seems to have been established to frustrate his widely advertised ambition to contest the 2007 elections and succeed Chief Olusegun Obasanjo as the president of Nigeria.

What particular offence is this former Nigerian President perceived to have committed as to have a website of this nature dedicated to his downfall? The website provides the following answers which cascade under Babangida’s photographs: “Well, didn’t you already know why he is unfit to be a president? So let’s stop him now...Unrepentant dictator... He thinks we are stupid. He joined the army to become a coup plotter. He pretended to be a President but never was a statesman; He faked education and ruined the universities...he annulled June 12

elections, he faked education, under his press freedom Dele Giwa was murdered, coup plotter, usurper, Let's stop him now.”

To strengthen its demonization project, the website also features an array of demeaning news items on Babandiga and some Nigerian leaders pieced together from Nigerian newspapers, magazines and other sources such as Google, Yahoo, BBC, CNN, *Time* magazine, among others. Individuals are also invited to write and submit their reports on the former Nigerian head of state. One of the most interesting pages on the website contains names of some prominent Nigerians labelled as “public enemies”. The names include those of retired Generals, ex-Governors, business men and women, one of the wives and brothers of Chief MKO Abiola. The offence committed by each of them is however not stated. As usual, readers are asked to join the discussion.

[www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com): This is probably the most cultured and intellectually engaging of the four websites. It places emphasis on rich exchange of ideas and opinions rather than mere news reporting though its newshounds also access the latest news culled from news portals and wire services. Probably because of its openness to all kinds of visitors and subject matters, the issues discussed in the website are open and not restricted as in the other sites earlier described. They include leadership questions in Yorubaland, Vision 2020, handover of Bakkassi to Cameroun, how Obama can win the US election in November, Nelson Mandela, and so on. Yet, the website is better patronized than the other websites. Like the other websites, [nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://nigeriavillagesquare.com) is linked to all major Nigerian newspapers and has space for advertisements.

The forum has rules and all postings that are off-topic, insulting, or in violation of the forum rules are posted to the “village dumpster” and many mails fall into this category. One of the golden rules of the website which makes it different from the others is that writers should “as much as possible refrain from personal insults and gratuitously inciting ethnic or group hatred”. The site has job announcements, opportunity for dating Nigerians, Nigerian and African music. Guest writers on the website include Rueben Abati, Pius Adesanmi, **Faouk** Martins, Uche Nworah, Okey Ndibe, Sonala Olumhese, Laolu Akande, Pat Utomi, Chidi Achebe, Wale Adebani, and many other prominent Nigerian writers.

## **A Critique of Online Public Sphere**

The websites reviewed above shed light on the track records of powerful individuals and groups in Nigeria that most citizens could only have whispered about in their bedrooms. To this extent, they can be said to be a major contribution to deliberative democracy and the public sphere in Africa. They are autonomous of the state in their ownership and management. What is left to be debated is the discursive inclusion and equality of the online sites. In engaging this issue, there is the need to go back to Habermas' original conception of the public sphere which has three clearly decipherable elements. The first is that the public sphere must revolve around mediated discussion of issues of public importance. The second is that the public sphere represents a new space of discussion for people who ordinarily would have been excluded in the discussion process. The third is that the ideas presented in the public sphere are considered only on their merit and not based on the social standing of the person making the contribution. Time and space would not allow us to take up in detail these three issues as they relate to online discourse in Nigeria. Some quick comments will be made on each of them and then more attention is given to the issue of popular participation in the online discussions organized around the question "whose deliberative democracy".

The issues addressed by the four websites discussed above are of public importance. It would definitely have been difficult, if not impossible, to discuss them in the conventional media. In this context, the websites significantly contribute to the expansion of the democratic space in Nigeria. The ideas presented in all the websites, apart from [www.againstbabangida.com](http://www.againstbabangida.com), are given online space based on their merit. They relate to the popular discourses in Nigeria. [www.againstbabangida.com](http://www.againstbabangida.com) is an exception in the sense that many Nigerians would not support its contents. General Ibrahim Babangida still has large followership in Nigeria irrespective of the governance problems associated with him in the past. The indecent language used against Babangida in the website also violates the principles of democracy and the understanding of a decent public sphere. What the website simply enjoins people to do is to hate Babangida.

In the section captioned "What's hot", the website showcases damning headlines from Nigerian newspapers on General Ibrahim Babangida: a long story on how he tried to paint the Late General Abacha as a saint; how the International Society for Civil Liberties and the Rule of Law is very happy that his name and those of a few other coup plotters who later became heads of state were excluded from the list of those to benefit from the statutory pensions

scheme; how he tricked Chief M.K.O. Abiola the acclaimed winner of the annulled June 12 1993 presidential election into politics and later ditched him, and a major documentary on the former Nigerian head of state. The vindictive ways in which all these are presented probably explains why the website gets the least feedback from members of the public.

Two cases can be cited to illustrate the extent to which the website is not well patronized. Professor Humphrey Nwosu was the chairman of the electoral commission that conducted the annulled June 12, 1993 presidential elections in Nigeria. He published a book in 2008 in which he exonerated General Babangida from being responsible for the annulment. He blamed the problem on some retired Nigerian military officers. [www.againstbabangida.com](http://www.againstbabangida.com) posted a poll in which the question was asked if Professor Nwosu could be said to have conspired with IBB in reaching this conclusion. The results of the polls (on August 22, 2008) are 16 (94.1%) Yes and 1 (5.9%) No ([www.againstbabangida.com/component/option,com\\_poll/task,results/id,32](http://www.againstbabangida.com/component/option,com_poll/task,results/id,32)). The first vote was cast on 21 June, 2008 and the last on 15 August 2008. This means that for a period of about two months, only 17 people cared to participate in the polls but the outcome fits well into the expectations of the website: that Babangida is a bad person. The lack of public interest in the site is also confirmed by the postings on the “Againstbabangida Forum” where several questions pertaining to Babangida were asked: “Is Babangida afraid to declare (for president)?”; “Can the EFCC probe Babangida?”; “What can be done to stop Babangida?”; “Is Babangida being protected by Obasanjo?” Nobody responded to any of the questions.

One problem associated with all but one of the reviewed websites is that they are not framed in the mould of scientific discussions. The “discussions” are not interlinked. The feedbacks are disjointed. Each person simply says what he or she feels and seems not too bothered about what the others have said as would have been expected in a group discussion. This takes us back to Habermas’ argument that if democracy is to be truly practiced in today’s large and complex societies, there must be a physical collective of mutually consenting members fit and willing to engage in rational-critical debate. In this context, a process that merely ventilates personal inclinations, wishes and convictions does not constitute a public sphere. This is simply because it does not encapsulate a process of opinion formation (Habermas 1990:43; Habermas 1989:236). On the other hand, a process that merely seeks for a person’s individual opinion (as in a public opinion poll, for example) would not constitute public sphere most especially when not framed in a manner that provides the opportunity for discursive will

formation. Communication in this process is not just a manner of knowing what individuals feel or a site for manipulating popular opinion but more importantly a process in which opinion is created by the process of unfettered debate itself. In other words, the public sphere is only produced when individual opinion is openly subjected to rational-critical debate that is moderated under a sincere atmosphere with the public in mind.

In this context, the only website that can be said to be anything near the expectations of the public sphere is [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com). The contents and contexts capture the idea of a public sphere and of deliberative democracy in an African setting. This is probably why the website prides itself on being “a market place of ideas”. It provides an African perspective to Habermas’ teashop scenario. Hence the website observes that: “In traditional African settings, people from all corners meet at the Village Square after a hard day’s work to sip unadulterated palm-wine, share news, gossip, jokes, music, dance, events and opinions. Visitors to the square are warmly welcomed and can get directions, information and clarify misconceptions. The Nigerian Village Square has been established to play this role for Nigerians and Friends of Nigeria across the entire globe” ([www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/about-us.html](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com/about-us.html)).

Having taken all the foregoing preliminary comments, we now have to return to dominant question asked by this study: whose democracy does the websites represent? The first entry point into addressing this issue is the observation that only few people actually participate in the discussions initiated by the websites in terms of sending feedbacks on the issues raised in them. Why? Is it because the people lack interest in the governance issues raised by the websites?

The problem is not that of lack of interest in public discourse. It is that of lack of capacity (intellectual ability, resources for accessing the internet and so on). The salary of a fresh university graduate in Nigeria, like in many other African countries, is about \$200. More than 60% of young school leavers in the country are unemployed. Those employed on \$200 definitely cannot afford the monthly Internet access rate of about \$100. The lines of work in which some of these people are engaged, except if employed by the government, are so exploitative and energy sapping that they have to leave home early in the morning and return late. The best they can do is to check their mails on the net and that is all. The unemployed go to the cybercafés to use the Internet. A casual survey of 10 different cybercafés in Ibadan

(Nigeria) suggest that most of these young people use the internet for sending scam messages to unsuspecting people, for monitoring football fixtures and results, for desktop dating with a view to getting foreigners willing to take them abroad, for watching x-rated videos, for filling admission and examination forms, for checking examination results, while the least frequent use on the list is the sending of genuine mails to friends. It was difficult throughout my search to come across one young person that was browsing the Internet for things having to do with public discourse.

This does not mean that Nigerians do not engage in public discourse. They do. It is a daily ritual in Nigeria for workers to spend few minutes in the morning on the discussion of public issues. The less privileged in the society – most especially the poor – often form themselves into “free newspaper readers associations”. They gather in the morning at newsstands to read newspapers and discuss the governance issues raised by each of the editions. The discussion sometimes gets out of hand so much so that people might proceed to abusing one another. This results largely from the fact that most of the discussions are not mediated and the “discussants” sometimes fall back on ethnic and religious sentiments in reaching their conclusions. In all, what the newsstand system often provides is an avenue for citizens to ventilate their anger against the Nigerian systems and return home to their problems. Many find joy in it and sometimes trek quite a distance to be able to join “the right discussion groups”.

Scholars are not left out of this apathy towards public discourse in Nigeria. I sampled the opinion of colleagues on what they use their Internet time for. Many of them use the Internet only for academic purposes (most especially gaining access to publications through JSTOR) and sending personal mails. Most of them are not interested in any public discourse. As one of them said: “What can our opinions do in this decadent society led by those who should be cooling their heels in the prison”? Political apathy is the problem here.

One other issue that must be taken into consideration when dealing with either the subaltern or educated class in Nigeria is the fact that many do not engage in public discourse because of their low level of political education. But as has been convincingly argued, deliberative democracy “imposes a substantial...knowledge burden” upon citizens (Somin, 1998:440). The expectations of deliberative democrats in this respect is that those engaged in any deliberative democracy must be capable of rational debate in terms of (i) awareness of the

basic political facts and emerging complex policy questions to be debated and (ii) ability to draw inferences from given premises. This goal is difficult to achieve in many parts of the world. For example, Posner (2003:163) has argued that even in the developed world, deliberative democracy in this respect is a mere “pipe dream hardly worth the attention of a serious person”. Somin (2004:8) too came to the conclusion that deliberative democracy is unrealistic. The latter argues that deliberative democracy is “both unrealistic and, as a result, potentially dangerous”. Both Somin and Posner argue that “public ignorance” is endemic everywhere to the extent that many citizens find it difficult to truly differentiate between good and bad policy options or programmes. Many can hardly assign credit to policy outcomes in any scientific way. In their own work, Ackerman and Fishkin (2004: 5) agree with Somin and Posner that “If six decades of modern public opinion research establish anything, it is that the general public’s political ignorance is appalling by any standard.” They blame the situation more on a failing civic system than on ignorance. This problem is worse in Africa than in the developed countries from which many of the scholars sampled so far take their examples.

If the Nigerian leaders targeted by the websites fail to respond to any of the issues raised in them and if the subaltern and educated classes fail to show any interest in the issues, whose democracy are the websites promoting? The answer is simple. The websites only promote the interests of the pro-democracy and human rights groups in the country. The problem of the people in this class in Nigeria is that they are fixated in their imagination as to the problems bedeviling Nigerian society and how these problems can be solved. The tone of their arguments suggest that many of them are not willing to accommodate opposing views, admit errors in their judgement where necessary, and set aside their interests at the altar of serving a common good. One therefore doubts if they themselves are ready for deliberative democracy. Those behind [www.againstbabangida.com](http://www.againstbabangida.com), for example, would find it difficult to see reason with anybody that tries to build the argument that anything good can still come out of Babangida. Most of the items in [www.saharareports.com](http://www.saharareports.com) and [www.nigeriavillagesquare.com](http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com) antagonized the ruling party in Nigeria, the PDP, and failed to provide equal amount of damaging information about the opposition political parties during the 2007 elections in Nigeria. This made some people to consider the websites the handiwork of the opposition parties in the country and to this extent question their objectives.

## **Conclusion**

The point made in this paper is that African leaders, most especially the “representatives of the people in the parliament”, have consistently failed to live up to the expectations of the people. They are self-seeking and lack interest in multi-issue democratic debate. The promotion of deliberative democracy is presented by the paper as a possible way out of the problem. This type of deliberation, which must be led by non-state actors, must be framed around rational-critical debates that cut across a wide range of social boundaries and are based on set rules, the most important of which is the rationality of what people say and how they say them. Participants in the debate must have a common interest in the search for truth and the application of truth to human progress. This must be done in such a decent way that has zero tolerance for the use of abusive language.

The websites reviewed in the paper show that the goals of both the online public sphere and deliberative democracy are difficult to achieve. Many of the people expected to participate in the discussions are poor, ignorant, and they lack adequate political education or are apathetic to political issues. Many lack the resources of physical and intellectual capacity for contributing to online fora and have little appetite for the kind of abstractions and arguments that online deliberation of public issues requires. They prefer to pursue other more “productive” activities. The importance of this finding goes beyond our present emphasis on online publics. The fact remains that where citizens are not deeply informed about or interested in deliberative democracy, the notion and its practice cannot gain firm root in society. While concerted efforts are being made to promote true deliberative democracy in different parts of Africa, immediate reformation of the existing civic institutions on the continent needs to be pursued. Africa can only develop when both the political class and the people stop having contradictory interests.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See “The sociology of the public discourses in democratic South Africa – Part 1”, [http://lnw.creamermedia.co.za/articles/attachments/01576\\_sociology\(1\).pdf](http://lnw.creamermedia.co.za/articles/attachments/01576_sociology(1).pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> *Sunday Punch*, June 8, 2003:11.

<sup>iii</sup> Senator Rasheed Ladoja, a former governor of Oyo state.

<sup>iv</sup> See Gbenro Adesina, “Ladoja is a bad man - Adedibu Tells Reps. Panel” <http://www.thenewsng.com/modules/zmagazine/article.php?articleid=13733> website of *The News* magazine (Lagos) accessed 7 February 2007.

<sup>v</sup> *The Guardian* January 14 2006:1

<sup>vi</sup> W. Adeyemo, “Ladoja is wicked – Lamidi Adedibu”, *Tell*, January 23, 2006 p.21

<sup>vii</sup> See Ademola Adegbamigbe, “Alhaji Lamidi Adedibu” *The Post Express* (Lagos) 10 May 1998, p. 9

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