

# Social Media and Terrorism in Post Covid-19 Africa: Burdens and Benefits

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## **Abstract**

*The spread of social media (SM) has brought many economic and political benefits, while also equipping terrorist groups with a tool for recruitment and propaganda. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020 arguably created the greatest global security challenge since 1945. As the world focuses on the fight to curb COVID-19 pandemic, the threat of international and domestic terrorism is not in decline according to the glaring indicators. As the COVID-19 outbreak begins to spread in earnest in Africa, we can expect more insurgent groups on the continent towards exploiting the emerging confusion to unleash mayhem and as well recruit members. Meanwhile, during the terrorist attacks people use social networks for information exchange, mobilizing and uniting and raising money for the victims. Sadly the Boko Haram has stepped up attacks in West Africa faced with this threat, scholars and practitioners from the security and counterterrorism fields are struggling to understand and assess the impact of the pandemic on global and domestic scenario. The aim of the authors is to provide further solutions through science and technology where there are artificial intelligence (AI), robotics engineering, internet-of-things (IoT), and quantum computing which are fast rendering the pre-21<sup>st</sup> century modus operandi obsolete.*

**Keywords:** *Social media (SM), aerial technology, community policing, interne-of-things (IoT) terrorism.*

## **Introduction**

The growth of the internet and the spread of mobile phones have increased social media use in Africa. According to Boyd (2007) Social media is "technologies that made social communication easy and enable discussion. The use of social media is like that of two edged sword (for good and evil). Though the increased use of information and communication technology can support social, political and economic development, it may also expose people to the terrorist activities as well as its recruitment. Social media can equip terrorists with an operational tool to enlist, train and communicate with their followers and potential recruits

Findings from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have shown that Al-shabaab, Boko Haram and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and other violent extremist groups in Africa all use social media, albeit to varying degrees and levels of sophistication. Blaker (2015), examining IS' use of social media sites to spread its message and encourage others, particularly young people, to support the organization, to travel to the Middle East to engage in combat-fighting side-by-side with other jihadists or to join the group by playing a supporting role- which is often the role carved out for young women who are persuaded to join. ISIL has the most advanced online strategy of the three groups and makes use of the widest range of social media platforms, including Facebook,

Twitter, Youtube, WhatsApp, etc. while all three groups use of social media to attract recruits both locally and internationally. These online influences are often complemented by the 'offline' influences of family and peer networks. For example, evidence suggests that ISIL attracts young recruits through the influence of religious leaders – as seen in the case of the radicalisation of medical students in Khartoum. It is equally used to inject fear and anxiety by publicising attacks or kidnappings, such as Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls in April 2014, etc. Recently, these groups have increasingly shifted their recruitment activities to private channel following account shutdowns on mainstream social media sites.

The COVI D-19 pandemic presents both challenges and opportunities for terrorists. Islamists affiliated to the so-called ISIL also claimed new territory in Mozambique, ([www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org), 12/6/2021). In northern Cameroon, seven people were killed when two suspected Boko Haram suicide bombers attacked a village on Sunday, police and a local official told the news agency AFP. Chad suffered its deadliest toll in its battle against terrorism on March 23, when a Boko Haram faction allied to al-Qaeda attacked an army base on the Boma Peninsula, in the Lake Chad region, killing 92 heavily armed soldiers at one time. Another Boko Haram faction allied to ISWAP (Islamic State for

West Africa Province) ambushed a Nigerian military convoy in Gorgi, Yobe State, on March 24. At least 47 soldiers were killed, local newspaper reported.

The Washington Post had reported in late February that al-Qaeda and ISIL, who are fighting each other in the Middle East, “are working together to take control of territory across a vast stretch of West Africa”. The post cited sources in the United States and West Africa ([www.dw.com](http://www.dw.com), 12/6/2021). Specifically, the widespread upheaval, uncertainty and global anxiety occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic has been seen by terror organisations as a golden opportunity to tie their messaging to information about the disease and intensify their propaganda for purposes of recruitment and incitement to violence proclaims Professor Kruglanski (<https://www.tandfonline.com>, 12/6/2021). These objectives are being pursued through a diverse and often internally inconsistent blend of communications including conspiracy theories, a situation where the “Islamic State” (IS) and al-Qaeda released mixed statements urging its followers to repent and take care of themselves because the corona virus was a punishment from God for non-Muslims, the news agency AP reported an exhortation to weaponise the virus and taking advantage of society’s weakness by launching widespread and consecutive attacks (<http://www.tandfonline.com>,

12/6/2021). Terrorist groups have flourished online, with ISIS becoming notorious for their high-quality propaganda videos and content that resulted in the recruitment and travel to Syria of over 40,000 foreign terrorist fighters from over 100 countries around the world. Moreover, a report from the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (UNCTED) noted that school closures and the move to distance learning has led to a dramatic increase in unsupervised internet activity among young people, who could be exposed to terrorist messaging on social media, online chatrooms or gaming communities (United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate, 2020). Over the years and in all climes, social media has become an active technological tool; as well as a news and communication channel for its citizenry. Access to mobile telephone especially among the technologically savvy youths has made dissemination of information easy with a snap of the finger. In recent times, as the pandemic encroaches on and emasculates world activities, social media platforms have been utilized as an information outlet to citizens. Its significance has gained more recognition owing especially to the fact that the government implemented a lockdown policy cum a work from home policy to curb the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Thus, it has become an active tool for engagement and communication for the dissemination

of plausible information as well as incredulous (mis)information by its purveyors.

There is a growing body of literature on social media. A critical analysis shows change and continuity in communication and information technology. Let's examine below some of the issues. Social Media is an offshoot of the Internet and according to DiMaggio *et al.* (2001, p. 307), the Internet refers to the electronic network or networks that link(s) people and information through computers and other digital devices; thereby allowing for person-to-person communication and information retrieval. The Internet is a major tool that emerged for the purpose of information dissemination; thus, the media acts as an information hegemony in terms of determining what information is made available to people as well as the impression people have on issues (Savrum & Leon, 2015). Largely, Social Media is the collection of websites and web-based systems that allow for mass interaction, conversation and sharing among members of a network (Murphy, 2013, p. 3). These diverse media outlets and communication networks played an important role in facilitating uprisings such as the Arab spring (AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2015, p. 2025). Its power lies in live pictures conveyed by video recording of events as it unfolds. The international live streaming of events is capable of mobilizing a huge population of citizenry for positive or negative end.

More so, it has played an important role in crippling dictatorial regimes. Unfortunately, these various outlets have been abused as unscrupulous people hide under its anonymity to defraud or relay false information. As the importance of social media is not lost on the general public for information engagement, its abuse in Nigeria especially during this emergency period is neither lost on any keen observer.

### **Literature Review**

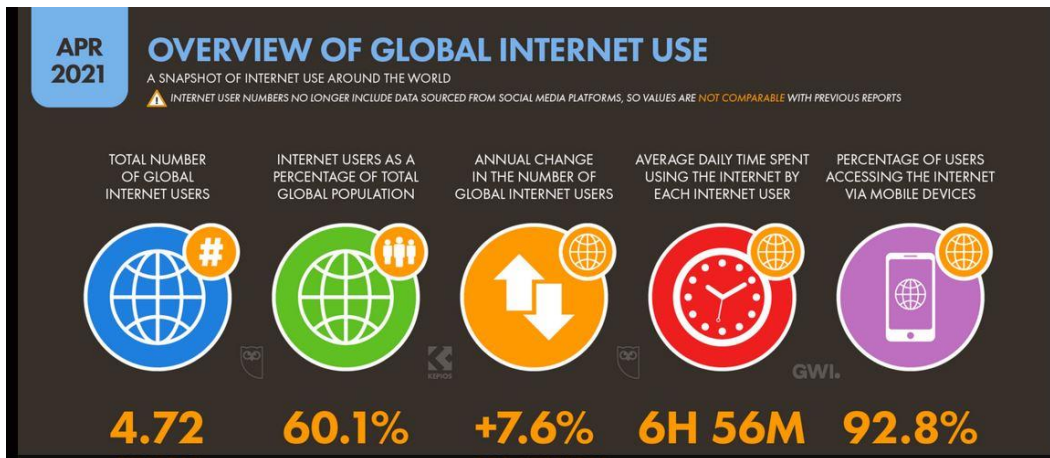
There is no definite number of terrorist groups in Africa. This is because terrorism is an evolving notion being perpetuated by myriad actors across the continent. According to the 2017 Global Terrorism Database (GTD) of the University of Maryland, a terrorist attack is defined as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion or intimidation". The GTD further highlights some elements that should be exhibited to qualify an attack as "terror" in the real sense of it. These elements include that an event must comprise a certain level of violence or threat, including property violence and violence against people and the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks must be sub national actors. The most prominent terrorist groups that create terror impact in Africa include Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia. The presence of the duo with their allies across Africa, has led to

property damage and colossal waste of lives and injuries which has advertently contributed to mass displacements of the civilian population. This growing trend of terrorist attacks remains a major security challenge for policymakers in Africa. The lethality of terrorism has increased the presence of the international community particularly the US in Africa. Its presence on the continent has not only been seen militarily, but also through counterterrorism-inclined policymaking processes- for example, a US policy based on the Combined Joint Task Force- Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), which was established in 2008 ( <https://www.accord.org.za>, 12/6/2021). A number of drivers of terrorism have been identified, they include:

- Historical grievances
- Political climate
- Poor governance

- Socio-economic factors
- Marginalisation of young people
- Radicalisation in prisons
- Inter-group/Religious rivalries

These drivers/instigators operate differently across individuals and communities and may intersect short, medium and long time frames. Social media plays a very essential part in the life of not only an individual but also in the functioning of a government (<http://www.unodc.org>, 12/6/2021). Statistics from Digital 2021 April Global Statshot Report reveals that 4.72 billion people around the world use the internet in April 2021 and that's more than 60 percent of the world's total population internet users are currently growing at an annual rate of 7.6% equating to an average of more than 900,000 new users each day.



However, the corona virus pandemic has had a big impact on internet user

research, so the actual figures may be much higher. The power of social

networking is such that the number of worldwide users is expected to reach 3.02 billion monthly active social media users by 2021. Terrorism today moves at the speed of social media and this calls for a redress as social media is used not only as a means to publish terrific audios and videos but also a way to develop relationships with, and solicit support from the vulnerable and marginalized groups in our society. The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes, United Nations, pg5 posits that terrorist organizations increasingly use propaganda distributed via platforms such as password-protected websites and restricted-access internet chat groups as a means of clandestine recruitment. The reach of the internet provides terrorist organizations and sympathizers with a global pool of potential recruits. Terrorism evolved from a structured group of masterminds that once controlled vast resources and organized the most spectacular and devastating terrorist attacks till date, to a multitude of informal local groups attempting to emulate their predecessors by conceiving and executing operations from the bottom up. Although physically unconnected, these terrorist hopefuls constitute a virtual yet violent social movement as they drift to internet chat rooms that connect them with one another and provide inspiration and guidance. California Los Angeles and a founding editor of the journal Terrorism and Political Violence Wave theory made a unique contribution to the study of terrorism

by positing a generational model that linked contemporaneous global terrorist groups based on their shared characteristics of ideology/theology, strategy/tactics and visions for the future. Most important, they share a vision that perceives in the ills and abuses of the world the seeds of a *revolutionary future*.

In a presentation to the UN Security Council in April, the Secretary General set out key points regarding of Covid-19 upon global security. He began by situating Covid-19 as foremost a health crisis but with far-reaching impacts. He put forth a number of areas of concern, including several matters related to the potential for exploitation by terrorists such as:

- The loss of trust in public institutions when governments are not seen as performing well in response to the virus, including actions by governments that further political tensions.
- The major impacts from the economic fallout in particular in fragile societies.
- The ongoing uncertainties that allow actors to promote division and turmoil.
- The lack of preparedness globally may inspire the use of bio-chemical attacks.
- The slowdown of conflict resolution efforts at a time when they are most needed.
- The continued threat of terrorism and opportunities that the

pandemic provides for more violence.

- The rise of extremist rhetoric and action from hate speech to discrimination accompanied by strong government response measures that are counterproductive.

### **Research Methodology**

The research leans on secondary sources (journals, newspaper, website, etc).

### **Suggested Solutions**

The ongoing evolution and impact of Covid-19 will keep uncertainty around us for the foreseeable future even as terrorism becomes the order of the day. From this study, some who feels that they are fighting for a right cause and the groups associated with ISIL and Al-Qaida have used the social media under the auspices of the pandemic to reinforce their narratives. They have also used the social media to incite potential terrorists to intentionally spread the Covid-19 and to use it as an improvised form of a biological weapon for example by coughing in crowded places. The third type being the organized criminal groups, has been trying to take advantage of the pandemic mainly to portray a positive image of their organizations to expand their activities and penetrate the legal economy. Terrorism is a serious crime; it cannot and should not be associated with any nationality, religion or ethnicity. The media play a key role in seeking,

receiving and imparting ideas and information. The strength of democracy can, to a large extent, be gauged by the independence and pluralism of its media. Any effort to prevent terrorist radicalization on the social media should be in compliance with international human rights standard and made according to the rule of law, so as not to impact unlawfully on the freedom of expression and the free flow of information. Security measures should be temporary in nature, narrowly defined to meet a clearly set-out legitimate purpose and prescribed by law. These measures should not be used to target dissent and critical speech. Effective responses for mitigating the influence of extremist ideologies need to come from multiple actors; from government to private actors and to local communities. Just as these:

- There is a grave need to map out strategic approaches to disrupt the system wide emergent structures and collective behaviours rather than the tactical removal of individual accounts just like the ban on Twitter accounts in Nigeria. Rather there should be police public outreach through the social media being “Police community policing”. Their role is to make the police more accessible online, to carry out preventive work online, to foster feelings of online safety among internet users, and to act as first

responders if they detect suspected criminal acts on the internet (hate speech, harassment, etc).

- Data mining/Web mining can be employed to detect terrorism related activities on online social networks. This is a technique to automatically discover and extract information from server logs. To carry out effective data mining and extract useful and relevant information for counter-terrorism and national security, we need to gather all kinds of information about individuals. In the 1970s, the Federal Republic of Germany was facing a wave of attacks by a left-wing terrorist group. Police investigations at the time established that members of the terrorist group lived in apartments rented under false names and paid the rent, electricity and telephone bills in cash. Police developed a tool to automatically screen the data available from public and private records against this behavioural profile, leading to 18,000 outstanding names for closer scrutiny. The police was then able to identify two suspects, one of whom turned to be a terrorist and the other a drug dealer. This tool can also be used to identify individuals on the basis of demographic and socio-economic criteria.

I. The use of New Technologies, Artificial Intelligence aid fight against global terrorism. Although terrorists have become skilled at manipulating the internet and other new technologies, artificial intelligence (AI) is a powerful tool in the fight against them. The internet “expands technological boundaries literally every day” and Artificial Intelligence, 3D printing biotechnology innovations, can help to achieve the sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) said Vladimir Voronkov, the first-ever under Secretary-General for the UN Counter-Terrorism Office. Facial recognition technology is also proving instrumental to fighting crime. Law enforcement has used facial recognition at large events for example, to identify individuals who are wanted for crimes by comparing their faces to a database of hundreds of thousands of known offenders.

- Use of unmanned Aerial Technology (Drones) can be deployed in clamping down in terrorists. Its superior performance has become the new favourite of modern warfare and has also become an anti-terrorist weapon. For terrorists hidden indoors, micro drones can detect the indoor environment without alerting the terrorists and provide accurate intelligence to the anti-terrorist forces. US Military and Israeli nation make use of this



technology in combating terrorism and drone successes during this era can be attributed to Israel.

- Use of Close Circuit Television (CCTV) can lead to a small reduction in crime. It is clear that video surveillance plays a key role in fighting crime and protecting public spaces. It is a valuable aid to the 'operational management' of urban spaces, such as town and city centres, industrial parks, hospitals and universities at this time when terrorists have resorted to kidnapping school children and some unknown gunmen to vandalizing the few government structures in south-east Nigeria. This will help to improve community safety as well as aid the early identification of crime and emergency situations and other disruptive incidents.
- Use of Internet-of-Things which is "a network of physical objects that contain embedded technology to communicate and sense or interact with their internal states nor the external environment" Gartner, IT research company. Previously, the internet only connected computers, servers and mobile devices together in a network, meaning people could connect to information across the globe. Now numerous everyday objects, devices and appliances, not typically associated with having

communications capabilities can be connected to that same internet and to each other-things like plugs, light bulbs, cars, public transport, medical devices, manufacturing components, electricity meters, household appliances or home security systems.

II. Promoting cohesion and reaffirming democratic values: Democracy and social cohesion are complementary parts of including in the public decision-making active citizenship with both rights and responsibilities. In order to arrive at a balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities for sustainable democratic societies, issues of disparities, inequalities and discrimination must be addressed. The role of citizens and "citizenship-building" must be recognized. Reducing social inequalities is part of this, ensuring equal access to public decision-making to all societal groups no matter their political affiliation, religious background or tribe. For instance by instruments of representation systems and affirmative action. A political society must respect the principles of freedom, justice and tolerance in order to safeguard the peaceful coexistence of its members. The concept of freedom that inspires democracy must be based on the possibility of a decent life for all citizens, in a society where personal and collective life is not dictated by necessity but by a set of human rights.

For social cohesion stems from a democratic effort to establish social balance, economic dynamism and national identity, with the goals of founding a system of equity, sustaining the impulses of uncontrolled economic growth and avoiding social fractures.

III. Police Reform and Community Policing: the reform of the police service is crucial to the development of a stable democracy, the creation of an open market economy and the development of a political social structure representative of the values and needs of the society. Civil society organisations in several countries, especially Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya, have campaigned for the establishment of civilian police oversight mechanisms. Introduction of community policing can be part of a holistic strategy to both counter terrorism and strengthen public confidence, within a framework based on respect for human rights and the rule of law. Community policing has remained a problem-solving approach to security management in many countries of the world. For instance, in the United States, community policing approach has nevertheless “gone a long way toward preventing crime”. It is no exaggeration that if people are afforded the opportunity to be involved in the policy and decision making process of the police, there may be no need of having large police. The outcomes of the partnership between police and community however differ. Thus, the effectiveness

in the way through which community policing is implemented in any given community will largely impact on the outcomes of the approach whether it will be successful or not (Young & Tinsley, 1998).

IV. Human rights and the police service must as a matter of urgency work hand-in-hand to curry the heart of the citizens to build long lasting confidence in letting out tactful information about terrorists and terrorism activities as officers who act improperly will be sanctioned. Police service should place human rights at the heart of all they do. Robust oversight mechanisms, both internal and external, provide the community and police officers with clear guidance as to the standards that are expected of the police. The police must check their excesses as it is pertinent they employ dedicated legal advisers specialized in human rights. The police should also key into simulation exercises on national security with community members.

V. Police public outreach through social media: “Virtual community policing” was established in September 2008 by the Helsinki Police Department to ensure a police presence, visibility and outreach through the internet and social media, including through Facebook, WhatsApp. Their role is to make the police more accessible online, to carry out preventive work online, to foster feelings of online safety among

internet users and to act as first responders if they detect suspected criminal acts on the internet (e.g. hate speech, harassment, terrorism). They also proactively participate in online discussions to provide accurate information about police-related issues and they are able to engage with some internet users who might be much harder to connect with face-to-face. The Police and Border Guard of Estonia in June 2011 also introduced online community policing with the appointment of their first web constable (<https://www.osce.org>, 12/6/2021).

VI. Introduction of National Security Youth Outreach Program: this should be constituted through a bias-free policing strategy. This will be able to achieve safe homes and safe communities as individuals from all tribes not minding their religious background will be incorporated into it. The main goal of the National Security Youth Outreach Program will be to engage youth on national security issues. This program must strive to:

- Inform and educate youth on national security in Africa;
- Discuss with and engage youth on national security issues (consulting with youths to understand their perspectives and concerns, as well as to learn about the impact of national security on young adults);
- Identify and participate in research and programmes (relevant to youth unrest leading

to violence, recruitment issues, terrorism prevention, etc.)

VII. Removing the barriers that hamper the active participation of women in countering terrorism, as part of law enforcement, other public authorities and civil society: Women are indispensable actors of change and development. Therefore, it is fundamental to overcome the traditional perspective of these actors as mere vulnerable victims in need of protection and to implement measures that guarantee that their perspective is taken into all stages of peace building processes by the international and local actors involved. Indeed, women have a crucial role to play in rebuilding war torn societies and in promoting social cohesion. Women are frequently victims of both terrorist attacks and counter terrorism measures as their children, husband, father, etc are involved; either way they are greatly affected.

VIII. State governments should adopt Constitutional Monarch system: there is always a local dimension to terrorism, it always happens somewhere, whether in the terrorists hide-out, whether they carry out their nefarious activities or where they are inducting new members. These terrorists are humans and as well community members; hence the state governments must rest some level of powers on the community rulers to guide and guard their communities

against communal and state interferences.

### Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic arrived at a moment when prospects for many African countries were promising. The uncertainty and confusion caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are being widely exploited by the international and domestic terror groups for spinning a plethora of sinister schemes portending a potential new tide of violence against people and governments. Security in Nigeria has reached a critical stage with insurgency in the North East spreading rapidly to other parts of Northern, South-East and South-South Nigeria. Similarly, there are communal clashes in the Middle Belt and South-East (precisely Effium and Ezza Effium in Ebonyi State), kidnapping in the South-West, cultists and thugs having a field day in the South-South. Infact, the military has been over-stretched, with policing duties in the whole states of the country and battle-fatigued. Nigeria has been managing terrorism for several years now. Restoring peace in the country goes beyond using the military alone. The peace which we require as a country cannot be achieved by using the armed forces to compel the enemy to submit to our will as a nation. So all components of national power, namely diplomacy, information and intelligence gathering, economic and military must be brought to bear to end the war on terror. In our (authors) lateral thinking,

office holders, politicians and multi-national must be striped of the military/paramilitary guiding and guarding them as we are running short of efficient and effective hands. This will force our leaders to do the right thing to avoid attack from the people they are representing and thus encourage good governance and representation. Jonathan Swift penned:” for in reason all government without the consent of the governed is the very definition of slavery” thus the need to sample the opinion of the Nigerian citizens both home and abroad and even it legal residents whether social media platforms should be banned or censored.

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