Amplifying Employees' Voice in the Nigerian Employment Relations for Better Corporate Governance: the Imperative of New Media

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Abstract

The Nigerian employment relations' is a process enmeshed in controversy and corporate-stakeholder conflict since its history. The recurring decimal in this situation is that stakeholder representation or ensuring that relevant voices – employees' voices – are represented for corporate governance is far from reality. Attendant upon this, both unionised workers (labour unions) and non-unionised workers (employee relations) in Nigeria are saddled with arresting power with corporate establishment in order to deepen the voice of relevant stakeholders that is melting like candle before scorching corporate self-interest. In ensuring that workers achieve their objectives, at least procedurally, this paper contends that new media can be used to actualise this much desired objective for better corporate governance, accountability and corporate-stakeholder relations as well as to widen the discursive space for relevant stakeholders' representation. This is because new media democratises debate as well as corporate governance dialogue as it affords everyone the platform to engage without restriction, which is an enabling platform that traditional media cordons off. This paper approaches this contention from the perspective of reviewing literature on the phenomena of employee relations in Nigeria, non-unionised workers representation, corporate governance, new media and accountability, which resonates with conceptually articulating a realisation of this intention from literature reviewed for better corporate governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: *employment relations in Nigeria, non-unionised workers, new media, corporate governance, workers' voice, accountability*

JEL Classification: *O30*

Introduction

It is well established in literature on employment relations in Nigeria that employees' voice and rights are marginalised as a consequence of Nigeria's organisational culture, political leadership and corporate governance (Nwagbara et al, 2013; Nwoko, 2009; Ubeku, 1983). As contended by Fajana (2006) workers' rights and voices are marginalised in the Nigerian employment system, which is inextricably associated with dispute and corporate-stakeholder conflict since its history. The remit of this paper is not to offer a historical rise and development of employment relations (or trade unionism) in Nigeria, rather it is verged on understanding how workers' voices can be heard as well as deepened in corporate-stakeholder relations

(employment relations), given issues beleaguering traditional media, which the new media transcends (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003).

Given the dynamics of power centralisation and voice in Nigeria's employment relations, workers are in constant conflict with providers of employment and corporate bodies to wrestle power in order to give voice to how their welfare and rights can be represented, and by extension protected. Giving workers opportunity in the process of arguing how their welfare and interests can be represented in the decision-making process is critical to development of corporate governance and accountability for better corporate-stakeholder relations. Scholars have commented on how the dynamics and processes of communication between stakeholders (workers) and corporate bodies has precipitated a culture of workers' marginalisation in contributing to ways in which their rights and welfare can be ensured (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003; Gose, 2013), hence, the main reason why worker's voices are silent in the process of collective bargaining and value co-creation (Paternoster, 2012). Thus, marginalisation of workers' voice, rights and welfare is a situation created and sustained by traditional media, which shies away from communication de-centralisation, accessibility and diversity of opinions.

In this regard, for a long time, workers' have bemoaned the nature and process of their rights, which is essentially why they are clamouring for democratisation of communication channels and processes that can precipitate a rethinking of employment relations in Nigeria. As a consequence, this development can be critical in shaping the dynamics of corporate governance in Nigeria for accountability and fair treatment of workers. This objective is pursued in this paper because new media (social media) has been lauded as communications platform, which people or workers can leverage on for democratised information dissemination, consumption and distribution, which is capable of making their voices to be heard in employment relations (Nwagbara& Reid, 2013; Smith et al, 2011). Over and above all, this process can galvanise actions towards changing corporate governance practice in Nigeria. This is the main aim of this paper. The methodology adopted here is literature review of key concepts shared in this paper from which a conceptual framework will be developed, which can help in deepening knowledge on how workers' voices and corporate governance can be reshaped via new media.

Literature Review

Corporate governance is a subject of considerable interest both in the business world and academics because of major companies' failures since the Cadbury Report of 1992. The Enron, WorldCom and Arthur Anderson failure as well as similar corporate malfeasance around the world threw accountability and corporate governance issues to public attention (Davis, 1999). Within the remit of this paper, this corporate landscape resonates with how poor employment relations governance in Nigeria has triggered corporate governance problems on the heels of centralised communication procedures in corporate decision-making process. Given this development, there is loss of confidence resulting from lack of transparency, equity, proper stakeholders' representation and accountability in the management of corporate affairs, which have caused incessant corporate-stakeholder conflict (Nwagbara, et al, 2013).

The Cadbury Report issued in the UK in 1992 laid the foundations of corporate governance, not just in the UK, but in the world in general. Most economies of the world have incorporated the main principles of the UK Combined Code into their own corporate governance systems for their business survival. The Cadbury Committee Report (1992) defined corporate governance as

> *the system by which companies are directed and controlled. Boards of Directors are responsible for the governance of their companies. The shareholders' role in governance is to appoint the directors and the auditors and to satisfy themselves that an appropriate governance structure is in place* (Para. 5).

Sadly this is not the case in Nigeria and most countries in the world in the wake of corporate failures and recent financial meltdown globally.

In addition, corporate governance is concerned with the *processes by which organisations are directed, controlled and held accountable* (Rezaee, 2008). This definition deals with the responsibilities of the organisation's board, its management, shareholders and other stakeholders and requires balancing their interests with economic goals of the organisation as well as the interests of the society as a whole. Cadbury (2000) made this point very clear:

> *Corporate governance is concerned with holding the balance between economic and social goals and between individual and communal goals. The corporate governance framework is there to encourage the efficient use of the resources and equally to require accountability for the stewardship of those resources. The aim is to align as nearly as possible the interests of the individuals, corporation and society* (p. 13).

The Cadbury Report's definition suggests that corporate governance is an overreaching concept with implications for organisation's approach to accountability, workers' welfare and protection of stakeholders in employment relations. Dalton et al (2003, p. 371) defined Governance as: "the determination of the broad uses to which organisational resources will be deployed and the resolution of conflicts among the myriad participants in organisations".

This definition stands in some contrast to many decades of governance research, in which researchers have focused primarily on the control of executive self-interest and protection of shareholder interest in settings where organisational ownership and control are separated. Dalton et al (2003) also stated that:

> *most of the governance research over the years has been on the efficiency of various mechanisms available to protect shareholders from the self-interested whims of executives. These years of research have been very productive, yielding valuable insights into many aspects of the manager-share conflicts. An intriguing element of the extensive body of corporate governance research is that we now know where not to look for relationship attendant with corporate governance structures and mechanisms to look for such relationship* (p. 371).

As pointed out earlier, governance is way of governing businesses which is in consonance with the interest of stakeholders and society as a whole and upholding the tenets and ethics of business. The need for organisations to make explicit behaviour expected from the board members is widely recognised. The common theme of corporate governance scandals seen in most corporations is the presence of unethical behaviour when corporations deal with wider stakeholders, which in this instance, is implicated in the way workers' voices and interests are represented for healthy corporate governance in Nigeria (Okike, 1994; Adegbite, 2012).

The foregoing entails that corporations have to ensure that effective and efficient governance framework is in place for good corporate governance. One of such frameworks is the nature of communication process between employees and corporate bodies (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Communication between corporate bodies and employees is implicated in this process (Smith et al, 2011). This is central to the processes of enhancing the quality and efficiency of regulatory framework that governs employment relations (Martin et al, 2013). Thus, good governance has gone beyond protection of minority interest, financial transparency to having the interest of the wider stakeholders and employees at heart, by proving fair means of engagement, co-creation of value, collective bargaining and employee-employer cohesion. Arising from this contention is: how can this be possible? How can corporation maintain healthy rapport with the employees? And how can employees' voice be heard in corporate boardrooms for better corporate governance and accountability in Nigeria? These questions find some explanations in the

dichotomy between traditional media and new media technology (Paternoster, 2012), as argued in this paper.

New media (technology) or social media is changing the way and manner in which people (including employees) exchange knowledge, information, opinions and ideas. New media represents 'a fundamental shift in the way we want to communicate' (Martin et al, 2013). In general terms, new media is online technology designed for social communication and interaction. The nature of this new form of media is in disparity with traditional media in which contents are broadcast *en masse*, naturally by a single person or organisation. New media uses technologies that enable people to connect with each other to generate and share information. Mathematically, new media can be summed as thus:

New media (social media) = Technology + Interaction

To this end,

> *… the "magic" of the Internet (new media) is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolisations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralises the position of speech, publishing, filmmaking, radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural production* (Payton &Kvasny, 2012, p. 83).

In reconfiguring organisational culture, processes of symbolisation and knowledge with respect to employee relations, new media democratises information dissemination and sharing, which can be instrumental in reconstructing power dynamics and stakeholder representation in employment relations (Smith, 2011). No matter how new media is defined, the overriding notion is that the meaning and associations that people make when they hear the term is that it brings up thoughts of public social networking sites, for example Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.

New media has become a vital feature of several people's personal lives, which has changed the ways in which people relate with one another considerably. It is estimated that about 60% of all Internet users globally access some form of social networking sites (CIPD 2012). As new media has developed, the ability of people as well as workers in Nigeria to voice their concerns and opinions as stakeholders the ways corporate practice and governance is practised has also grown in dimensions and outlook (Nwagbara& Reid, 2013). From organisational perspective, many corporate bodies have responded to this call and have in fact helped in shaping this paradigm shift in communication, in which case new media has become integral in winning consumer trust and brand advocacy. This process enables customers to express their views, preferences and ideas about products and services, which has rectilinear relationship with organisation's level of productivity and quality of service provision.

From the point of view of employment relations, researches show that two-thirds of employees (and customers) conceive of new media as a better and productive way to communicate with companies than what traditional media offers, with 68% believing that it gives them a greater employee or customer voice (Paternoster, 2012). As Smith et al (2011) contend, new media has "provided individuals with a voice in public space". Until recently, corporate emphasis on new media is on how to win customers' attention and to increase productivity. This has been adopted by wider stakeholders (employees) to increase the levels and layers of their voice in the strategies used to bring accountability and better corporate governance in employee-employee relations. Nigeria is not alone in this case. There is no gainsaying the fact that by 2020, many organisations will be entirely reliant on new media to engage with employees (Gose, 2013). This envisioned corporate-stakeholder relation – reworked employee relations in Nigeria – will see new media taking centre stage in the whole gamut of processes that can be leveraged to amplify employees' voice particularly in Nigeria, where issues of employment relations is in the back burner (Nwagbara et al, 2013; Otobo, 2007; Nwko, 2009; Fajana, 2006).

Conceptual Framework

According to Howell &Letza (2000) the problems of corporate governance are based on moral issues and as advised by the Kantian argument centuries ago, duty and obligation should cause corporate governance to achieve effective corporate governance strategies to look after stakeholders. It is in the spirit of this that the hallmarks of corporate governance and accountability in employment relations in Nigeria can be realised. In this connection, Hampel Committee (1998) in its final report stated that:

> corporate governance must contribute both to business prosperity and *accountability.... and that the purpose of those responsible for corporate governance is to safeguard the interest of shareholders and to protect and promote the interests of other stakeholders such as managers, employees, customers, suppliers governments and the communities where the company operates* (Para, 15).

Accordingly, the principle aim of corporate governance is to ensure that the boards of directors perform their justly and properly. It is also about the protection of shareholders and stakeholders' rights by enhancing disclosure and transparency, which can be instrumental in facilitating effective functioning of the organisation. This also resonates with ensuring effective regulatory and enforcement framework that can reshape corporate governance in Nigeria (Nwanji& Howell, 2007, p.1).

With this in mind, new media as conceptualised in this paper has the potential to not only increase stakeholders' voice in employment relations in Nigeria, it can be used by various stakeholders in the Nigerian employment relations to make corporations accountable to employees and the society at large (Gose, 2013; Paternoster, 2012). This process can create an atmosphere in which issue of labour, employment, workers' right and voices can be reconfigured for better Nigeria. The main issue here is that rethinking employee relations in Nigeria chimes with a vision of new employee voice, w matter that can bring probity, accountability and better corporate governance to the front burner. The next section of this paper looks at how this contention can be reflected as well as insights this can bring to bear.

From Monologue to Dialogue: Towards New Employee Voice in Nigeria

The term "employee voice" was first used in 1970 by the German political economist and creator of the "hiding hand principle", Albert Hirschman, in his trail-blazing treatise: *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organisations and States*. The term was basically used in defining those who suffer in silence, but are confident that things will get better. Employee voice can be related to both large groups of employees and whole workforces, nevertheless it can be equally be applied to employees on a smaller scale (for instance, within a team). Broadly, the term employee voice means the extent to which employees or workers are able to have a say concerning work activities, their interest representation and decision-making issues within and outside the organisation in which they work (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011). Sharing similar view, MacLeod & Clarke (2009) illuminated this conception as when employees' views are sought and listened so as to see that their opinions count in order to make a difference in corporate governance.

Central to this debate is that new media can facilitate a process in which workers can speak out condemning the dynamics of employee relation, which they deem unacceptable for better organisational practice. This is the highpoints of employee voice. In this regard, according to IPA and Tomorrow's Company (2012), employee

> *voice is about enabling conversations to take place across the whole organisation…It means that the things employees say and the ways in which they say them positively contribute to helping an organisation meet all its objectives – from the level of the immediate task being undertaken through to the strategic objectives of the organisation* (p. 2).

Therefore Zielinski (2012) argues that new media can be used by employees for empowerment.

In taking this contention further, Armstrong (2009) has articulated that employee voice has four purpose, which it serves; these are outlined below:

o   It presents a form of collective organisation to management;
o   It influences leaders' decisions on work-related issues;
o   It helps organisations to understand the employee attitudes about work;
o   It shows the reciprocal nature of the employment relationship.

Wilkinson & Fay (2011) have also stressed the benefits accruable form new media engagement for better corporate governance:

o   Improved employee attitudes, behaviours, loyalty and more co-operative employment relations;
o   Improved organisational effectiveness, including increases in productivity and individual performance;
o   Improved systems by tapping into employees' ideas, knowledge and experience and promoting greater diffusion of information.

Consequently, employee voice has the capacity to enhance people's job satisfaction, workers welfare and psychological wellbeing of relevant stakeholders (publics). Employees who have the opportunity to say something about their welfare or to report on what concerns them help to change organisational culture and structures (Armstrong, 2009). As CIPD (2012) reports, employees who have access to information sharing and dissemination can help to further issues of workers' wellbeing, accountability and corporate governance.

Prospecting for Benefits of New Media in Nigeria's Employee Relations Debate

Given the strength of argument made in this paper as well as literature reviewed in this regard, the following ways are how new media can be used to add zest to employee relations in Nigeria for accountability and better corporate governance.

Increase in reach: Given the reach of new media as against the constraints of traditional media, employees can widen discursive space for fair consciousness raising as well as fair contribution of ideas that can help bring better corporate governance culture in Nigeria

Issue of immediacy: New media is reputed for immediate news content consumption, dissemination and sharing as opposed to traditional media platforms such as radio and television. So this can help in the process of education as well as informing concerned people or relevant publics of vital issues that affect them. These and more are what Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn as well as other social media tools help people (employees) to do.

Accessibility of information: The Internet (new media) provides incomparable access to news content and information. So, this can potentially help in making industrial debate accessible for better information sharing and dissemination that can potentially provide a platform for more robust debate and inclusive debate.

Co-creation of value, diversity of opinions and collegiality: The process of collective information dissemination and sharing can lead to co-creation of value and ideas that can see a

transformed Nigerian employee relations as relevant participants in this debate are enabled via new media.

Power/information de-centralisation: Given the affordability and de-centralised nature of new media, employees can foster power de-centralisation, which can be instrumental in transforming the entire dynamics of employee relation in Nigeria.

Independence of thought: Since new media helps people (employees) to personalise information, it can potentially help in shaping independence of thought as concerned people can offer their perspectives about employment without being coerced or their views rejected by a centralised source.

Cost efficiency: Given the affordability of new media as opposed to traditional media, which is very expensive to afford, employees can cut costs on employee engagement.

Collective bargaining/Intelligence sharing: Lastly new media technology fosters collective bargaining and intelligence sharing, which can galvanise a rethinking of employment relations in Nigeria. This contention is not naturally pursued by traditional media.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that for a better corporate governance, accountability and improved employer-employee relations in Nigeria, new media is of essence. This is because it is a platform that not only de-centralises information dissemination, sharing and consumption; it also contributes in the arsenal to empower workers for increased voice representation. As opposed to traditional media such as radio, television and print media (newspapers and magazines), new media such as Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and others are capable of reconstructing the landscape of employment relations in Nigeria as has been contended here. So, for a better corporate governance and accountability, it has been unequivocally stated via conceptual framework proceeding from literature on the key phenomena addressed in this paper that new media is crucially important for better employment relations in Nigeria, which can revamp corporate governance and accountability issues.

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