

Using social media for long-haul activism: lessons from the BBOG movement in Nigeria

Introduction

The Bring Back our Girls (BBOG) is a women-led, spontaneous movement that erupted in Nigeria following the abduction of over 200 schoolgirls by Boko Haram terrorists in 2014. It soon gained widespread presence on the streets but even more online. The BBOG remains a unique movement in contemporary Africa in that it is women-led and depends on bold confrontation offline and viral advocacy online.

The objective of the BBOG is clear: pressure the government to rescue and return all the abductees safely. The movement has recorded remarkable achievements such as the return of over 100 girls and the priming of the plight of the remaining girls.

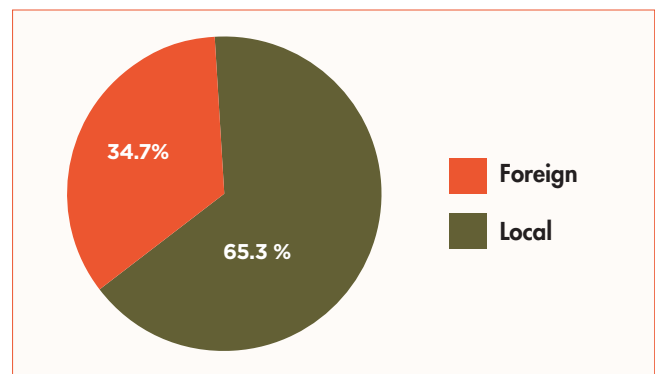
The demand for the release of the abductees, has, however developed a life of its own as many other actors now continue to promote the issue even when the BBOG appears to be fatigued and silent. The movement's use of social media is most probably responsible for this. What can similar movements or other social actors learn from this?

Methodology

Commissioned by the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) under the "New Forms of Social and Political Action" project, a team of Nigerian researchers tracked the continued visibility of the Nigerian schoolgirls' abductions in online media discourse. They followed the Facebook page and Twitter handle of the BBOG, set up Google Alerts, and conducted non-participant social media ethnographic observation. The search on the two platforms and on Google Alerts was conducted using the terms "Bring Back Our Girls", "BBOG", "Chibok Girls" and "Dapchi Girls", all with and without hashtag symbol. The data were obtained from 1 January to 31 May, 2018 and were subjected to quantitative content analysis.

Findings

Figure 1: Media attention by location



About two third of the stories (65.3%) returned by Google Alerts were from local media sources. The remainder (34.7%) were from media sources outside Nigeria. It is significant that the issue of Nigerian schoolgirls abduction by the Boko Haram continues to attract foreign media attention, despite time lags and competing terrorist attacks and wars in different parts of the world.

Visibility of BBOG group and other actors in media reports about the abductions was also examined and compared. About one third of the stories (39.4%), which originated from Nigerian media, focused on the BBOG group. Actors other than members of the BBOG group were featured in the majority of the stories (60.6%). These included NGOs, foreign media, local media and prominent individuals. This finding reveals that many actors other than members of the BBOG group have maintained a sustained attention to the problem of schoolgirls abductions in Nigeria. In foreign media, the number of stories which feature actors other than members of the BBOG is disproportionately higher. Only three of those stories feature views of BBOG members, whereas 55 stories feature views of actors of different nationalities.

Consistency of the BBOG group with the core demand of the movement, as reflected in media reports, was also examined. The attention of the BBOG movement, as portrayed in the media, is

divided among various issues: Chibok and Dapchi schoolgirls abductions and Boko Haram (44.2%), response to government attacks on the movement (20.9%), commentary on national politics (18.6%) and killer herdsmen attacks (16.3%). Popular members of the BBOG movement were visible in media reports on other protests with varied objectives, making strong political comments that are critical of the government.

Table 1: BBOG’s Social Media Followership

Facebook	April	May	Change (%)
Likes	231,030	230,538	-492 (0.2)
Following	219,694	219,246	-448 (0.2)
Twitter			
Following	95	96	1 (1.05)
Followers	26,300	27,500	1,200 (4.56)

The BBOG’s Twitter community experienced an increase between April end and May end, but its Facebook community experienced a decrease during the same period. It is noteworthy that the increase recorded in the group’s Twitter community does not result from the group’s deliberate effort. While the group followed an additional one Twitter account in the study period, 1,200 Twitter accounts followed the group, resulting in a 4.6% increase in the group’s Twitter community. With 492 and 448 Facebook accounts unliking and unfollowing the group’s Facebook page between April end and May end, the group’s Facebook community

reduced by 0.2%. The upswing in the Twitter community of the BBOG coincided with the period that another set of schoolgirls was abducted in a town called Dapchi. The new followers on Twitter, totalling 1,200 accounts, most probably followed the BBOG expecting its reaction to and information on the Dapchi abduction. This time however coincided with the time that the founder and leaders of the BBOG launched another movement, the Red Card Movement (RCM) whose aim was clearly political: replace the current Nigerian leadership with another that was more competent and less corrupt (Red Card Movement, 2018). Not many people could differentiate between BBOG and RCM; the latter might have been seen as the political wing of the former. This created some alarm among Nigerians who concluded that BBOG had finally derailed on its non-partisan mission. This alarm could be the reason for “unliking” and “unfollowing” on Facebook. Coupled with this was that BBOG’s response to the Dapchi abductions was less than zealous compared with its reaction to the Chibok abductions.

Origin and Popularity of Views Expressed on BBOG Facebook Page

Only three out of the 10 most popular posts originated by BBOG movement. The remaining seven posts were shared by the BBOG movement on its Facebook page. Two of the shared posts originated from local media—Sahara Reporters and Premium Times. Five were stories originally published by foreign media—BBC, New York Times, and VOA. The focus of all 10 posts is consistent with the object of the group.

Table 2: Interaction Statistics of Posts on BBOG_Nigeria Facebook Page

Primary source	Focus	Date	Like	Comments	Share	Total
BBOG	Thoughts about mothers of #ChibokGirls on Mothers’ Day	13/05	528	16	147	691
Sahara Reporters	Boko Haram Returns Kidnapped School Girls in Dapchi, Five Dead	21/03	378	15	90	483
New York Times	Kidnapped as schoolgirls by Boko Haram	11/04	216	9	87	312
BBC	Many #ChibokGirls are dead	15/04	227	2	75	304
BBC News	On claims that many Chibok girls are dead	15/04	227	2	75	304
VOA	Nigeria’s Dapchi Girls Go Back to School	21/05	229	3	58	290
Premium Times	How 14-year-old girl helped Chibok girl escape Boko Haram	13/01	234	6	39	279
New York Times	Interviews with rescued Chibok girls	15/04	150	15	70	235
BBOG	Police harassment	24/04	142	15	45	202
BBOG	4th year commemoration in New York	09/04	130	5	56	191

Origin and Popularity of Views Expressed on BBOG Twitter Timeline

The tweet with the highest reaction statistic on @BBOG_Nigeria Twitter timeline was originated by CNN International. Two tweets by Rep Frederica Wilson, a member of the United States House

of Representatives, also feature in the top 10. Even though only one tweet with high level of reactions originated from @BBOG_Nigeria, four other tweets originated from members of

BBOG—Florence Ozor, Ms Maureen Kabrik, Bukky Shonibare, and Aisha Yesufu. Thus, it could be said that 50% of the tweets originated from the BBOG group. Of the remaining two tweets, one originated from foremost Nigerian journalist on reporting Boko Haram related issues, Ahmad Salkida, and one from a local online news, Premium Times. All 10 tweets are consistent with the focus of BBOG advocacy.

This internationalisation of the Chibok abductions illustrates how an otherwise local issue can attract international attention if properly fuelled by social media ubiquity. It also shows that original issue advocates can attract followers whose energy and consistency will outweigh theirs.

Table 3: Interaction Statistics of Tweets on @BBOG_Nigeria Twitter Timeline

	Primary source	Focus	Date	Comments	Retweets	Likes	Total
1.	CNN International	Leah Sharibu's refusal to convert to Islam	15/05	42	662	428	1,132
2.	BBOG_Nigeria	Leah Sharibu's birthday	13/05	92	421	399	912
3.	Florence Ozor™	Leah Sharibu's birthday	13/05	31	184	264	479
4.	Ms Maureen Kabrik	Leah Sharibu's birthday	12/05	14	233	216	463
5.	Ahmad Salkida	Proof of life of Chibok girls in captivity	13/05	12	205	149	366
6.	Rep Frederica Wilson	Message of hope on Leah Sharibu	19/05	12	98	246	356
7.	Bukky Shonibare	Leah Sharibu's birthday	14/05	6	222	123	351
8.	Premium Times	Leah Sharibu's birthday	14/05	20	195	130	345
9.	Aisha Yesufu	No one contacts Leah Sharibu's family	07/05	18	147	163	328
10.	Rep Frederica Wilson	Fear still grips Dapchi Girls' School in Nigeria	21/05	13	81	178	272

Conclusion and Policy Considerations

Four years on, the BBOG movement continues to enjoy media attention, despite competing issues across the world. The movement has leveraged its high media visibility to keep the campaign for the release of the abducted schoolgirls in the view of relevant local, foreign, and international authorities.

The BBOG movement is visible in the media as committed to demanding the release of the girls through consistent offline activities. However, as visible as the movement has remained, the demand for the release of the girls is more popular than the BBOG movement. In other words, the BBOG has primed the issue to the point that it (the issue) has got a life and dynamic of its own. Even when BBOG appears to be quiet or fatigued, many other actors keep the girls' abduction in the public domain. This is a remarkable achievement for the BBOG.

Four Policy Lessons for Social Actors and the Civil Society

The immediate aim of issue advocates is usually to prime or promote an issue; the ultimate aim however, is to evolve public ownership of the issue. This means, to get the public to own and promote and defend it. The BBOG has achieved this, through ceaseless use of social media. All issue advocates should target such a feat.

1. The first lesson for social actors and the civil society is the need to adopt multiple and complementary platforms.

Advocacy that criss-crosses different platforms will reach a wide range of actors. BBOG deployed Facebook and Twitter but also networked with bloggers, online news media, and individual crowd pullers including opposition politicians.

2. Second, securing the sympathy and support of international actors is important in long-haul advocacy. Major international actors are newsmakers. If their support is obtained, their words and actions in support of an issue easily bring the issue to the attention of international media. Mrs Michele Obama's support for the BBOG aptly illustrates this.
3. Third, online activities must be complemented by visible offline activities. The intransigence of policy actors is oftentimes too stiff to be moved by social media alone. Offline activities give flesh and strength to online activism. Not only this, offline activities (protests, talks, marches) are the usual input for reports by traditional as well as new media.
4. Fourth, social actors must carefully separate other activities of theirs from the activities. The key actors of the BBOG failed to do this. Each time they addressed any other issue or form a different organisation (such as the Red Card Movement), their views and positions were seen as that of the BBOG. The price for this can be heavy. For instance, the Red Card Movement is one that seeks to unseat the present administration and all others perceived to be old and of similar ideologies. It is a political movement led by the central figures of BBOG. It has been therefore difficult to keep the image of the BBOG as non-partisan.

Highlights



The BBOG movement remains the only body visible in the media as committed to consistent offline activities organised to demand the release of the abducted girls.

The BBOG movement retains a popular following on Twitter and Facebook.

Besides the BBOG movement, multiple local and foreign actors are visible in the media discourse of the Nigerian schoolgirls abductions.

Despite the numerous issues competing for media attention all over the world, the Nigerian schoolgirls abductions continue to attract local and foreign media attention four years on.

Social actors and civil society actors must seek to give life to the issues they advocate so that the issues get public ownership and go farther than the actors can reach. To accomplish this, they must adopt multiple and complementary platforms, recruit newsmakers, combine offline with online activism, and clearly separate their advocacy from other activities.

Acknowledgement

Ayobami Ojebode, PhD (Professor of Applied Communication, University of Ibadan, Nigeria) and Wole Oladapo, PhD (Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Nigeria) co-authored this research brief in collaboration with the Partnership for Social and Governance Research (PASGR). The brief emanated from data collected from the study 'New Forms of Social and Political Action: A Study of #BringbackOurGirls, Nigeria', which is part of a broader programme - Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) - an international research programme which explores how social and political action can contribute to empowerment and accountability in fragile and conflict-affected settings, with a particular focus on Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan (see: <https://www.ids.ac.uk/idsresearch/action-for-empowerment-and-accountability-a4ea>). A4EA is funded by UK aid from the UK government. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.