The Digital Black Atlantic

Josephs, Kelly Baker, Risam, Roopika

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This chapter examines the growing interest and activities in the development of digital humanities scholarship and pedagogy in Nigeria that began in 2015 when digital humanities (DH) formally entered the Nigerian academic space. It highlights two DH-related initiatives in Nigeria that demonstrate how scholars and researchers in this part of the Global South are taking advantage of the proliferation of digital tools and web-based resources to engage in academic and social projects. These two initiatives—the Lagos Summer School in Digital Humanities and the Corpus of Nigeria New Media Discourse in English—are projects of the Centre for Digital Humanities at the University of Lagos and are designed to create awareness about digital humanities and to encourage the use of DH tools and techniques by scholars. They are part of a practical approach that recognizes the growing and widespread interest in digital humanities scholarship and research in sub-Saharan Africa.

**Digital Humanities Pedagogy in Nigeria**

Although the field of digital humanities has given rise to lively debates and productive research activities in Europe, the Americas, and Asia for the last two decades, digital humanities in sub-Saharan Africa began to emerge only in the last few years. The initiatives at the University of Lagos Centre for Digital Humanities (CDH) are among the very first efforts to formally institutionalize digital humanities programs in this subregion. In Nigeria, digital humanities is beginning to redefine humanistic scholarship and reengineer traditional approaches, theories, and models in the humanities. CDH’s initiatives explore the following pertinent research questions:

- In what ways can digital humanities transform humanistic scholarship in Nigeria?
- What tools and techniques can be deployed through practical training to equip young researchers and scholars?
How can digital humanities projects examine the ways political actors and stakeholders use new media tools to promote their political ambitions and engage citizens?

What contributions can our digital humanities initiatives make toward promoting the principles and practice of digital humanities in Nigeria and Africa?

In 2017, the Lagos Summer School in Digital Humanities (LSSDH) was established as an annual interdisciplinary research and capacity-building institute on the principles and practice of digital humanities in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa. Its primary aim is “to raise, develop and equip a new generation of scholars and researchers in the humanities and social sciences that will drive innovative digital scholarship, national development.” The summer institute focuses on the application of computer-aided methods and digital tools in the humanities, cultural studies, and social sciences and on how these techniques and methodologies are helping develop new insights and approaches to humanistic research and studies. The first digital humanities institute was held at the University of Lagos in summer 2017, and the second one was held in fall 2018 with participants from Nigeria, Cameroun, Ghana, and Togo. Facilitators from Europe and North America introduced participants to basic approaches in digital humanities, programming, and text encoding. To date, LSSDH has provided the training in technology, mentorship, and guidance to enable participants to refine and conceptualize individual and collaborative digital humanities projects. Collaboration and networking opportunities have developed and flourished, thus helping extend and expand digital humanities knowledge and practice in the sub-region.

Providing opportunities for training and capacity building in this new field has become a key mechanism to develop the field as a whole and, in particular, a group of scholars and researchers who can push the frontiers of knowledge and innovation beyond academia’s laboratories and classrooms. Such training platforms offer a range of benefits that include bringing together theory and practice, making, and thinking; fostering creativity, play, and problem-solving initiatives; encouraging participation, collaboration, and public engagement; and increasing critical understanding of the digital environment and how digital technologies are increasingly central in the humanities and allied disciplines. As a training and mentoring platform for doctoral students, young scholars, and early/mid-career academics in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, the LSSDH provides the intellectual infrastructure and international resources to explore tools, techniques, and theory offered by digital humanities. Scaling up research activities in this new field holds a lot of promise for the benefits of the larger society. We anticipate that the LSSDH will be held annually and will continue to offer training, sharing of expertise, mentoring, and the time and space to foster the development of project ideas.
The Corpus of Nigeria New Media Discourse in English Project

In addition to offering the LSSDH, the Centre for Digital Humanities has developed initiatives to explore the connections between humanities and computer science in Nigeria. One such initiative is the Corpus of Nigeria New Media Discourse in English (CONNMDE) project, which began in 2014. It has demonstrated how the sociopolitical sphere in Nigeria is experiencing significant transformation as a result of the revolution in mobile communications and digital technologies. The project, which has constructed a virtual repository of online conversations in Nigeria from social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, focuses on the impact of new media on politics and democratic practice in Nigeria. CONNMDE operates according to three assumptions: (1) the use of new media in Nigeria has created the space and resources for the production of large volumes of social data that can be studied by researchers for academic and policy purposes; (2) these new technologies potentially provide tools that can inspire innovation and development within the broader fields of science and technology in conjunction with the human sciences; (3) this development has the potential to fashion a new future for humanistic research and society at large by encouraging digitization and archival of contemporary humanistic data, research outputs, discourses, and historical and cultural materials.

The CONNMDE project has shown the gradual impact of the use of the internet and social media networks on the growth of democratic practice and civic engagement in Nigeria. Scholars such as Usha Harris have observed that internet-based media platforms offer people “a place of sanctity for freedom of expression and participatory democracy.”2 Others, including Terje Rasmussen, agree that social media such as Facebook and Twitter has the capacity to revolutionize public discourse and transform electoral processes as they encourage citizens to participate in politics and to engage with politicians.3 In many countries, new media has transformed average citizens from being passive consumers of political messages under mainstream media regimes to producers and consumers of online content. Active online users are gradually being transformed into digital activists and community mobilizers through crowdsourcing strategies.

The CONNMDE project aims to build a database of approximately ten million words. The first phase of the project focused on construction of a corpus of online political text (two million words) that draws on political and governance activities, events, and sources. This Corpus of Nigeria New Media Political Discourse in English (CONNMPDE) is searchable for information relating to specific political issues, campaigns, conversations with political figures, and speeches given at events. The project thus critically examines the ways in which emerging technologies are narrowing political conversation. It also explores how the application of new technologies in Nigeria’s emergent democracy is facilitating
inclusive governance practices and reducing status disparities and gaps in political communication.

Using digital tools (such as SketchEngine, AntConc, and OpenRefine) and through manual downloads, the CONNMPDE project harvested relevant text from the homepages and social network platforms of key political actors and other key stakeholders in Nigeria posted during the 2011 and 2015 electoral cycles. These were the first electoral cycles in which the major political parties deployed social media platforms and digital technologies for political education, voter mobilization, political campaigns, and electoral management. In addition, the Nigerian general election campaigns of 2015 used many popular social media tools: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, the blogosphere, and other web-based platforms such as partisan websites, independent websites, and SMS messaging. The 2015 election was also the first to use an electronic card reader in voting to promote transparency and increase the credibility of the electoral process by authenticating individuals as qualified registered voters.

This project has yielded important new insights on political discourse in Nigeria. For example, textual analysis revealed that a new key term, “stomach infrastructure,” was created during the 2014 Ekiti State governorship election campaign. “Stomach infrastructure”—associated with candidates and the content of political campaign discourse in Ekiti State—collocates terms such as “expired rice,” “kerosene,” and “milk,” some of the items that the People’s Democratic Party candidate distributed to woo voters during the campaign, leading him to being accused of promoting “stomach infrastructure” rather than concrete socioeconomic infrastructure.

Our preliminary outcomes show that, by encouraging greater participation in public discourse and policy conversation, political campaigns in Nigeria have the potential to improve and promote more robust and informed dialogue. They also may reduce political conflicts while gradually causing political leaders to be more accountable. Political conversation in Nigeria has moved from a monolithic, vertical, unidirectional, and top-down communication style to a horizontally diffused and bidirectional process.4 It has become more engaging, democratized, and fluid. Further, the project has shown that new media political discourse in an emerging democracy is context-sensitive and thus responds to and accommodates sociocultural nuances and traditional social meanings. We found that social identity and social relationships that exist offline often shape online political discursive practices and that there is a migration of offline discursive practices to online platforms. Political ideologies, political associations, and political literacy are confirmed to be variables that influence online conversations on politics and governance topics, and there is topicalization of national politics on virtual platforms as issues of national and global importance are mediated and transmitted via online platforms. There has been a gradual convergence of mainstream traditional and modern political discursive practices in the social media space, which is blurring political communication
boundaries, and there is a possibility of identifying social forces and stakeholders that influence discursive practices. There is also a gradual emergence of a shift in which public governance is becoming the “people’s” governance. By monitoring online political conversations, we may be able to predict and prevent outbreaks of political violence and electoral fraud. Clearly, social and digital technologies are changing the ways politics is done as well as how democracy is promoted and practiced in a developing nation.

Continued work on the project is exploring several questions about the role of social media in politics in Nigeria. In what ways do new technologies affect the sociopolitical ecosystem in Nigeria? What are the social, cultural, political, and economic implications of the internet and social media for the Nigerian sociopolitical space? How can new technologies and online conversation improve governance and better inform the decision-making and policy-making processes related to electoral processes and democratic practices in Nigeria? Can new media bring about a broad social and political transformation?

Digital media technologies are offering new tools and methods to transform how political leaders interact with citizens in Nigeria’s emergent democracy. Significantly, these technologies have increased both the space and speed of politics and political conversation and, by implication, other areas of language research/social phenomena. By combining traditional and new media approaches, scholars in the humanities and social sciences can arrive at a more dynamic research outcome that can change both academic research enterprises and social praxis. This new model of engaging people across a wider spectrum of social, political, cultural, and literary spheres can be used to reframe social reengineering narratives not only in Nigeria but also in larger communities all over the continent of Africa. Other benefits of the application of technologies include the possibility of extracting fresh information from existing traditional data, generating new interpretations that may guide decision making, and providing educational material that can promote political literacy and deepen democratic cultures.

Notes
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1. Oke, “2nd Lagos Summer School.”
2. Harris, “Community Informatics and the Power of Participation.”
3. Rasmussen, “Internet-Based Media, Europe, and the Political Public Sphere.”


