**Digital social engagement for smart and connected societies**

**(Bursting the filter bubble)**

**A speech by Chude Jideonwo at Tech Plus, July 22, 2016**

It is not quite a week ago when news came in that Turkey's military were in the streets of its major cities. Tanks rolled through bridges, and planes were in the air. A coup was underway, and with President Erdogan away from the capital on a business trip and out of reach of mainstream media, a reporter from CNN’s arm in Turkey conducted an interview with him via Facetime, where he used that opportunity to get a message out to the people, and urge them to enter the streets and resist the coup. They got climbed on tanks, blocked their path, and by Saturday afternoon, the coup was foiled.

Erdogan has blocked social media websites in Turkey on a number of occasions in the last few years, but that did not stop him from relying on it in the time of his greatest need. It was an irony that was not lost on anyone who follows events in that country.

Social media has become so widespread, so pervasive, that even those who appear to dismiss it, seek to control it. The word ‘disruption’ seems to be quite overused these days, but social media has genuinely altered the way leaders communicate with those they serve, AND the way those citizens communicate with each other.

**Social media and the elite**

Using social and mobile platforms, it is cheaper than ever to reach more people than ever. While his opponents spent millions in advertising, Donald Trump won the Republican nomination essentially with no TV advertising, using his Twitter feed to gain the mainstream media attention that got him an ever wider audience. The free coverage he got was in excess of $1 billion.

It is not a one-off. In this same election cycle, Bernie Sanders used social media to move from a fringe candidate who was not expected to make much of an impact, into marking his mark on the Democratic Party’s platform. It is a sign of how what we think is fringe today, can become mainstream tomorrow.

My next example is a personal experience, but please, no one should attack me. \*smiles\* In our work with the Muhammadu Buhari campaign, we also realised the power of social media’s ability to bypass the mainstream and go straight to the people, creating a movement in the process. We faced censorship from some media outlets, but on social media, we had no restrictions. We could communicate directly.

Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders are two examples of the anti-establishment wave sweeping the developed world, a wave amplified by social media. Not too long ago, they could simply have been shut out by the gatekeepers of the mainstream media, and denied coverage. But that is now virtually impossible.

**Social media and the filter bubble**

Why are these movements easier to create than ever? Movements are created by like minded people, and Social media makes it easier to find those who think like you. You amplify their tweets, and they amplify yours, and in so doing, attract other like minds. And so from the bottom up, a movement is built. This bottom-up way threatens the elite consensus, because the mainstream media costs a ton of money to be visible in.

By breaking down these barriers, by letting one man broadcast to millions instantly and without any filters, everyone has a seat at a table.

This has real implications for the present and the future of social engagement in connected societies. The algorithms of the major social networking sites and most, like Facebook, only show you stories based on your reading habits. Most sites now use cookies as well, that do the same thing. The result is that we are increasingly in a filter bubble which exposes us only to those views that we are comfortable with. For everything else there is the ‘unfollow’ or ‘block’ button.

After a while, we forget that there are others in the world who do not share our views, who do not see things as we do. We forget that we do not only engage respectfully when others agree with us, but especially when others disagree.

There are many ways by which Social media enables, enhances and preserves democracy. Turkey's failed coup is a major example of the latter. But the polarisation that social media brings can also paralyse democracy. Democracy requires compromise, an ability to listen to other people who do not share our views. But in a world dominated by the filter bubble, democracy descends into a shouting match.

However, there is also a way in which social media bursts the bubble. Once high political office is attained, leaders can be increasingly isolated from those they are supposed to serve. Their retinue of aides and advisers tell them what they want to hear. Social media, however, allows for direct feedback, and smart government officials already use this feedback to gauge the mood of at least part of their constituency.

Stepping out of our bubbles can be hard, but only by doing this consciously can we be better leaders, and better citizens.

Thank you very much.