**The rise of the digital age; social media as a tool for business relevance.**

**Being text of a speech delivered by Chude Jideonwo, Executive Director of The Future Africa and Managing Partner of Red Media Africa, at the Xclusive Evening with Diamond Woman on Friday, June 26th 2015**

One of the more interesting things I hear in my line of work is listen to people who still speak dismissively about social media and its impact, either for themselves or their businesses at any level of their existence.

RED Media Africa is about to celebrate 10 years of operation, and those 10 years have been defined by exploiting the limitless possibilities of the media in order to reach and empower a generation of Nigerian and African youth.

It has been a very eventful decade, and looking back, I and Debola Williams, my partner, could not have started RED at a more important time. Facebook was incorporated in February 2004. YouTube came exactly a year later, in 2005. The first Tweet ever was posted on March 21, 2006. On October 6 2010, Instagram was launched. Another photo sharing site, Pinterest, started in March of that same year.

In less than ten years, we have seen the rise of social media from nothing to the Goliath it is today. There are an average of 300 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute, 55 million status updates on Facebook a day, 550 million Tweets a day, and 70 million photos on Instagram a day. The increasing number and power of smartphones and the decreasing costs of data have given birth to an accelerating trend of media production and consumption that has redefined social, political and business landscapes and will continue to do so.

The explosion of social media usage is a key result of this trend, and it has come with dramatic consequences for all classes of people, organisations, and even governments. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission, Nigeria has 143 million active mobile phone lines and 87 million active GSM internet subscriptions as at April 2015, a growth of 32% from the corresponding month a year ago. 76% of Nigeria’s internet traffic is mobile internet traffic, making it the most mobile country in the world, according to an authoritative yearly study of internet trends by Kleiner-Perkins, a venture capital firm.

What do all these numbers mean for your business? These numbers mean that social media is not only here to stay, it is also becoming an increasingly important aspect of our society that you can leverage in a number of very important ways.

**Thought Leadership**: All of you seated here today are high net-worth individuals who have distinguished themselves in multiple fields. You have so much to share with the world. If and when you can share your knowledge and your life experiences with younger women, many of whom look up to you whether you know it or not, you can become a thought leader. Your stories can help others find their purpose. Your stories can help others avoid mistakes. You do not have to wait until you retire to share your insights. You can start now. Today.

At RED, we are not just interested in having employees who do their work well. We want to create superstars and thought leaders who are informed about all the trends affecting the media and its intersection with technology, politics, business and social issues, and who go on to dominate conversations about such topics. Thought leadership confers prestige and marks out the person as a potential mentor, and the organisation where the person works as a first choice for top recruits.

From a personal branding perspective, thought leadership can help you position yourself for higher responsibilities in your chosen career, or a transition from public to private sector. A number of former government officials like Charles Soludo and Oby Ezekwesili have remained very active in national discourse through this means.

**Using network effects to publicise and grow your business**: I have lost count of the number of businesses started by young women just by selling their wares on Twitter to those who follow them. One has been especially successful at selling fabrics solely by using Twitter and Instagram, and celebrating those who turn out in her fabrics for their events. Several others have taken to food delivery businesses, from Twitter. The resources you would need to generate the same viewership for your products and services now, compared to the reach that was possible with only traditional media is far less and far more targeted.

This applies to businesses at any stage of their existence. One of our clients at RED is House of Tara, and although it is a successful business that has been in existence for many years, we were able to generate a new buzz around it and its activities through the Makeup In Nigeria Conference (MINC) that engaged 700 hundred participants for 12 hours, and emphasised House of Tara’s role as a leader in Nigeria’s beauty space.

**Image making:** When used properly, social media can be used to soften the image of a person or organisation, counter negative perceptions and bolster already positive perceptions. More and more politicians are using social media to achieve just this objective for themselves, with varying levels of success.

Former Vice President Atiku Abubakar is a textbook example of how social media can be used to cast a much more favourable light on a person, and one of the biggest recent triumphs of RED in recent times has been reintroducing Muhammadu Buhari to the electorate this year, helping to create a movement that led to his historic victory by interacting directly with voters and humanising a man once thought of as ‘stiff’. We deployed an array of social media tools and used text, video and audio to dispel rumours about his person and advance his argument for change.

The role of social media is now seen as so important, that Hilary Clinton’s campaign manager is a 35 year old, and the official start of her campaign was streamed live on Twitter’s live video application called Periscope. More and more politicians are finding out that the only way to connect with Millenial audiences is through active engagement on social media. That’s where the audience is.

**In governance:** Even though political campaigns are but for a season, governance is a constant, and as such, the interaction between leaders and their constituents is a constant one. In a nation marked by a more active electorate who increasingly consume their information through mobile phones in addition to more traditional sources, discussions on social media now influence conversation on our radios and TV sets.

Unfortunately, much of government communication from ministries, departments and agencies at federal and state level leaves a lot to be desired. Failing to communicate government policies properly to citizens leads to those policies being misunderstood or even worse, rejected.

Most of organs of government at all levels have no regular presence on social media, losing a big opportunity to communicate with those they are supposed to serve. I say ‘regular’ presence because it is not just a matter of setting up social media accounts and abandoning them after a while. The aim must be regularly engage in a clear and professional manner that will be of benefit to all sides.

Our governance communication arm, Statecraft, is in the forefront of making public officials understand the need for clear, timely, and proactive communication, and we are lucky to count the current President, Muhammadu Buhari, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and Rotimi Amaechi as current and former clients.

**Conclusion**

Using tools like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, individuals and organisations are finding out that they can dictate their own narrative, rather than relying on the press to take their messages to the people. The internet has removed the barrier to the point that you can interface with people directly without relying on intermediaries, and this opens up limitless possibilities to pursue and further your interests, whatever these interests might be.