A DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This was a discursive analysis of social media usage for political communication in Nigeria. It was argued that four key stakeholders in the electoral process (the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), politicians/political parties, the electorate, and Civil Society Organizations) made extensive use of social media during the 2011 and the 2015 elections in Nigeria. Each of these stakeholders used the social media to achieve a number of interrelated objectives. Based on the arguments, it is concluded that social media platforms have fundamentally aided political communication in Nigeria. The government, politicians and political parties, INEC, the electorate and relevant NGOs and many other stakeholders now massively use the social media to communicate political information to their relevant target audience. This has improved Nigeria's political system.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the conventional media have continued to be massively utilised political communication, even mediating the face-to-face communication model. However, sequel to the increase in the knowledge of the computer and Internet, as well as the emergence of a lot of devices in Information Communication Technology (ICT), both the politicians and the electorate are now utilizing new media platforms such as blogs, websites including other platforms of social media in disseminating political issues to the relevant audience (Olabamiji, 2014). Currently, a lot of people in many parts of the world have continued to embrace the various social networking websites, particularly *Facebook*, which have commanded a very high number of users. In recognition of the above, those involved in politics are massively using the social media platforms to aid their political ambitions before, during and even after elections (Šuminas, 2012).

In a modern democracy, social media can be used by governments to involve citizens in decision-making, and by civil society to engage people in specific issues. However social media can also be used to broaden political participation by helping citizens to communicate with their representatives and with each other. Arguably, this political communication is most important during election campaigns when political parties and candidates seek to mobilise citizens and persuade them to vote for a given party or candidate (Davies, 2014).

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Those involved in politics take make different efforts to communicate their political agenda to the masses with a priority goal of improving their level of popularity and persuading voters to vote in their favour. To enhance their channels of communication, politicians have begun to accommodate the social media platforms in their communication strategies. This is because the social media platforms are now beginning to gain high level of acceptance in the political arena even as the platforms are gradually assuming the position of the major channels for political communication To this end, political participants often seek to harness the communication potentials of the social media to promote their political ideologies (Šuminas, 2012).

In many parts of the world, the ever increasing access to internet, the rapidity of internet ready smart-phones and including many other highly digitalized communication devices are no doubt enhancing political communication. More so, the emergence of numerous internet platforms such as web-based new media-personal websites, social networking sites, blogs, e-newsletters, are also impacted immensely on how politicians, political parties, political agencies, the electorate and other political stakeholders engage in political communication. Arguably, this could be said to have given birth to the intensive use of social media in political activities. Before this era of high level internet enabled communication, the conventional media-radio, television, newspaper and magazine were the major avenues through which political activities were effectively and most successfully communicated to the public. However, the social media platforms are changing/ challenging such statuesque through the simultaneous massive, prompt and rapid dissemination of information (including political information) to members of the public (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012).

The emergence of the social networking websites offers politicians the platforms to engage in well articulated and coordinated political communication and in the manner they so desire. The implication of this is that via the social media platforms, politicians and other stakeholders can disseminate political messages to the audience and the messages will get to the audience in exactly the form and style intended by the senders. The social media platforms have changed the old order where the conventional/ traditional determined the form and style of messages based on their editorial policies. Currently, the social media provide the avenue for political actors to engage in political communication without hindrance. A Facebook post by a political would be read in the audience in the exact manner it was posted. This is unlike what is obtainable in the traditional media where such message will go through some processes of editing by the media outfit to ensure it conforms with the house style or editorial policy of such media organization which some sensitive points the person intends to make would have been edited out in the process (Šuminas, 2012).

One other critical role of social media in the promotion of political communication is that the platforms provide political parties and candidates, especially the not very popular political parties and candidates, to escape media censorship and disseminate their political messages unhindered. The social media enables political actors to influence the traditional media practitioners who are often on social media searching for story ideas to enrich the content of their reports (Davies, 2014).

The youths constitute the largest group of social media users. In this regard, political communication via the social media platforms are directed more at those in such category. And these platforms have over the years proven to be very potent avenues to engage the youths in effective political conversations. The platforms are used to promote and coordinate participation in political events that take place offline. This is in a bid to endear a candidate or political party to

the public. The power of the social media to rapidly engender social connections makes it very critical to political communication (Davies, 2014).

Currently, the entire scope of human communication can be linked with the global network of networks including the social media. The issues range from technological or political issues to personal conversations. From all indications as well as current realities, there is no doubt about the fact that the social media platforms have enhanced/increase political communication channels when one takes a critical look at the role of social media and social networking websites in political communication. The platforms have offered more rapid pathways for politicians to disseminate their political information to the masses. And the messages get to the audience directly and unedited or uncensored. This situation as brought by the social media differs from the former order where the traditional media to an extent determined the content of your messages (Kim and Geidner, 2008).

More so, social media utilization for political communication has also had an impact on the cost of engaging in political communication. The platforms have decreased the level of communication intervention expenditure among political stakeholders. As earlier asserted, one can disseminate information to a large group of people simultaneously with minimal cost which involves subscribing to the internet (Krueger, 2006).

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Politics has indeed greatly evolved in recent decade with the advent of the new technology. With it, information sharing has greatly improved, allowing citizens to discuss ideas, post news, ask questions and share links. With social media, politicians reach the masses with the aim of assessing the political atmosphere even before venturing into the campaign. Social media is perhaps the best tool to assess the popularity of a candidate especially by the young people and craft the best language to use as a campaign slogan. Social media also provides a politician with the opportunity to be informally free with the public. This free connection through social media helps politicians to communicate their humour, indicating their approachability and accessibility to the public. With social media, politicians appeal to citizens; this makes them seem more personable and gives them advantage of keeping in constant contact with their supporters. Social media grants many people the chance to participate actively and get involved fully in the political discourse by adding their voices on issues posted on the social media sites. Thus, advancing the tenets of participatory democracy that sees media as a debate avenue and aids tremendously in actualizing public-sphere journalism. It affords electorates a friendlier avenue of assessing candidates for political offices and promoting transparency in governance (Okoro and Adibe, 2013).

Social media have shaped political communication in four major ways. Firstly, it has deepened segmentation of audience triggered by the rise of network television channels and specialized magazines and websites. The second way social media have shaped political communication is by weakening the gate keeping capacity of the traditional media. Before the emergence of social media, the traditional media played a key role in deciding what is sufficiently important to be aired to the public. This gatekeeper role of the traditional media enables it to set the agenda of public discourse (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012).

Related to the weakening of the gatekeeper role of the traditional media is a third effect of social media on political communication. The practice of breaking news through the social media rather than press releases in the traditional media has gained currency in recent times. Press secretaries

are increasingly losing their control as gatekeepers, and individuals now have more liberty to frame and prime issues they consider important. In all, the use of social media limits the control of traditional press secretaries over the outflow of information, and also decreases the dependence on traditional media for up-to-date content. Finally, social media has emerged as the new influencer in social, economic and political settings. Research has shown that increasing use of social media for political communication has led to declining newspaper readership and television viewership in many countries (Australian Media and Communication Authority, 2007) cited in (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012). Under this circumstance, the social media may likely continue to dominate political communication, and to serve as a tool for gathering and disseminating political messages (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012).

Social networking websites, micro blogs, portals for photo and video sharing provides politicians with the new possibilities to involve and mobilize their supporters. However, this does decentralize the process of political communication and information distribution, as the politicians lose the possibility to control and influence the further process of message dissemination. The diversity and number of easily accessible channels of social media make it difficult for the politicians to form and keep their positive image. Nowadays politicians can be filmed or photographed at any place at any time and then the movies or pictures can be rapidly spread through the different channels of social media. Therefore, as several researchers of politics assume, the interactive nature will encourage politicians to be more honest, behave themselves in public and try not to entangle in ambiguous situations (Šuminas, 2012).

The use of social media for political communication can also be referred to as *Cyberpolitics*. When applied in election campaigns, Cyber politics can develop significantly in at least three directions in the not too distant future. It could become a *campaign medium in its own right, not necessarily displacing but supplementing more traditional ones*. It could become an important vehicle of *interest group solidification and mobilization* within and across national boundaries. And it could *diversify the exposure to political communication* of those regular users who enjoy exploring the access to a wider range of views and perspectives that the Internet affords (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) cited in (Mirandilla, 2010).

SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE FOR POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

Former U.S. President Barack Obama set a record in 2008 when he deployed the social media platforms during the U.S. presidential election campaign. After that record setting act by President Obama, numerous politicians embraced the platforms and are now adequately using them to promote their political intentions. Nigeria had her first real test of social media use for political purpose during the 2011 general elections. The new technology played an unprecedented role in the April 2011 Nigerian General Elections. INEC officials had in early March 2011 welcomed the assistance of civil society volunteers with its Facebook and Twitter accounts as well as a new media situation room which received feedback from the public and later began to provide real time information and answered constituent questions. Nigerian politicians actively utilized social media in their campaigns. They sent bulk text and voice messages in unprecedented numbers. They made massive use of Facebook pages and other social media platforms to win supports and canvass for votes. President Jonathan as we mentioned earlier declared his intention to run for the presidency on Facebook and subsequently became the second most "liked" head of state in

the world after US President Barack Obama (fanpagelist.com). Organisations like Enough is Enough Nigeria, ReclaimNaija, WangoNet and Iam Lagos established platforms enabling citizens to report election-related incidences with pictures, videos, text messages and voicemail. At the same time, traditional media houses such as Channels Television, *234Next* and *Punch* newspaper used new media to disseminate information and gather feedback from viewers (Okoro and Adibe, 2013).

An outstanding factor that was very noticeable in the 2011 general elections in Nigeria had to do with the politicians' and the electorate's massive utilization of the social media platforms particularly the Facebook to disseminate political messages as well as properly engage in the political process. The importance attached to social media in the 2011 general elections was better explained by President Good luck Jonathan decision to declare his intention to run for the highest political office in the land on Facebook. Jonathan had on Wednesday, September 15, 2010 informed his 217,000 fans on the world's most popular networking platform (facebook) of his intent; 24 hours later, 4,000 more fans joined his page, and by the day of the election, on 16 April 2011, he had over half a million followers. His closest rivals-Alhaji Mohammed Buhari of the CPC, Nuhu Ribadu of the ACN and Alhaji Shakarau of the ANPP were also among those that made heavy presence on facebook and other social media platforms. In addition to the approximately 3 million registered Nigerians on Facebook and 60,000 on Twitter, almost every institution involved in Nigeria's elections conducted an aggressive social networking outreach, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, candidates, media houses, civil society groups and even the police. Apart from the presidential candidates, many governorship aspirants, senatorial and house of assembly seat contenders from the various states of the federation also embarked on aggressive use of social media platforms especially the Facebook to disseminate their political messages, woo electorates and support groups towards the actualization of their goals (Udejinta, 2011; Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe 2011;Okoro and Adibe, 2013).

The social media has become almost an inseparable part of human life in places where they exist. In recent times, social media have evolved new forms of democracy, government, and have become a clear and more effective voice of many. In fact, social media have influences on all spheres of human life. The impact of the social media was seriously felt in Nigeria's 2015 general elections. It was felt in the electioneering processes-campaign, and eventually the polling procedures (Oyenuga, 2015).

Four key stakeholders in the electoral process (the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), politicians/political parties, the electorate, and Civil Society Organizations) made extensive use of social media during the 2011 and the 2015 elections in Nigeria. Each of these stakeholders used the social media to achieve a number of interrelated objectives. For INEC, social media was basically deployed to share information on the elections and receive feedbacks from the public on the performance of election officials. Politicians/political parties used social media primarily to reach out to the voters and canvass for support. The voters used social media to report their experiences and receive election related information. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) used social media tools to mobilize and educate the electorate as well as to cover and report the outcome of their monitoring of the electoral process (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2016).

The significant use of social media during the 2011 and 2015general elections in Nigeria was a result of three key factors. Firstly, the use of social media in Nigeria's 2011 and 205 elections

reflects a global trend towards "internet elections" or "e-electioneering." The second issue that underline the use of social media in Nigeria's 2011 elections is the tendency of some Nigerian politicians to tap into the opportunities offered by the social media for on-line campaigning. During the 2011 general elections, many politicians, particularly the presidential aspirants, used social media tools to connect with voters and constituents. The third issue that underscores the use of social media in Nigeria's 2011 and 2015 elections is the tendency of Nigerian civil society and the electorate to take up social media as a tool for improving the efficiency of election observation. Prior to the conduct of the 2011 and 2015 elections, elections in Nigeria have been largely flawed by vote rigging and other electoral malpractices (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Based on the arguments presented above, it is concluded that social media platforms have fundamentally aided political communication in the Nigeria. The government, politicians and political parties, INEC, the electorate and relevant NGOs and many other stakeholders now massive use the social media to communicate political information to their relevant target audience. This has improved Nigeria's political system.

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