

## Research Article



## Social media and politics in Nigeria: A conceptual framework

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### Abstract

This paper examines side by side social media and politics, and the relationship between the two. The place of social media to rally political support is no longer in doubt. To advance the conversation and mobilize political supports, social media has become a critical political tool for campaign planners. Politicians create several social media accounts and handle in other to reach the electorates and to have a more direct contact with them, something the traditional media didn't provide. Some of these social media platforms are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. Politicians have swerved from the use of the old media such as the print (newspapers) and the electronic media (television and radio), to the use of the new media during electioneering to actualize their political goals. Social media has great impact on the voting pattern of the electorates, especially youths who constitute the largest proportion of social media users in Nigeria. We therefore, recommend that Nigeria's political leaders and future aspirants should desist from using the social media to spread false stories, hate speeches, caricature figures etc. on other candidates that will destroy their public image. Rather, they should portray what they have to offer to the masses.

**Keywords:** communication, democracy, election, modern democracy, politics, political communication, social media

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**Public Interest Statement**

The study will be of significance to researchers in the field of mass communication, public administration and political science. It will also serve as source of literature to scholars conducting research on a similar topic. It will also aid the masses in general in understanding the relationship between politics and the new media.

**Introduction**

The world is today celebrating the improvements in communication technology which has broadened the scope of communication through Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) (Asemah, Okpanachi and Edegoh, 2013). The emergence of social media has further widened the reach of media organisations and eased audience access to media contents. In this age of digital revolution, a single gadget is enabled to become a newspaper, a radio or television or a movie watching device (Auwal, 2018).

Social Media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue. Social media takes on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking. With the world in the midst of a social media revolution, it is more than obvious that social media like facebook, twitter, myspace, skype etc., are used extensively for the purpose of communication. This form of communication can be with a person or a group of persons. Today most of the people specially the youngsters are hooked on to the different social media for keeping in contact with their peers. Social media is media for social interaction as a superset beyond social communication. There are pros and cons to the use of social media. One most important advantage is the online sharing of knowledge and information among the different groups of people. This online sharing of information also promotes the increase in the communication skills among the people especially among the political candidates and electorates.

Some of the popular and widely used social networking sites include Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Blogs, MySpace, LinkedIn, among others. Today, social media have become a natural part of the everyday lives of people all over the world (Chinedu-Okeke and Obi, 2016). Elections were used early in history by ancient Greece and Rome, and throughout the medieval period to select rulers such as the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope. In Medieval India, around 920AD, in Tamil Nadu, palm leaves were used for village Assembly elections. The leaves, with candidates' names written on them, were put inside a mud pot for counting. This was known as the Kudavolai system. Elections were carried out to select Rajas by the Gana during the Vedic Period. Ancient Arabs also used election to choose their Caliph, Uthman and Ali in the early medieval Rashidun Caliphate. The modern election which consists of public elections of government officials, didn't emerge until the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the idea of representative government took hold in North America and Europe.

## An Overview of Social Media

The term social media refers to the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue (Baruah, 2012). Social media refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create -share, exchange and comment contents among themselves in virtual communities and networks. Social media employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co- create, discuss and modify user- generated content. It introduces substantial and pervasive changes to communication between organizations, communities and individuals (Adesope and Ogan-Charles, 2015). Social media is a means of interaction among people in which they create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Furthermore, social media depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, concrete, discuss and modify user-generated content (Chiemela, Ovute and Obochi, 2015).

In the words of Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein as cited in Baruah (2012), social media is “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” Social media is media for social interaction as a superset beyond social communication.

Carr and Hayes (2015) define social media as “internet – based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences to derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others”. Their definition was created to provide the distinct area that will assist scholars in future research on the communication perspective of social media. Although the most common definition describes the technology behind social media, i.e., internet and user-generated content, their definition provides the rationale why users are into social media. Social media applications are accessible to any platform, e.g., smart phone, tablets, laptops, computer, etc. The functionalities include among others: a) messaging, b) virtual relationships such as friends, follower, or connection, and c) tweeting. Some users are always connected to their virtual self that takes most of their time away from a face-to-face relationship.

The internet offers an endless number of niche to social communities where members can gather around a common topic. Both general and specific topics now have living homes on the internet; anything from colon and digestive health to security and compliance can and do have active social media communities (Didiugwu, Ezeugwu and Ekwe, 2015). Social media are media for social interaction using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques. It is the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogue (Joseph, 2013).

## Social Media Platforms

There are over 50 social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Badoo, Snapchat, LinkedIn, etc. However, the mostly used by politicians, especially in Nigeria will be

briefly discussed.

**Facebook:** Facebook, for example, is one of the most popular social media from the west, and it is one of the most visited social networking sites with more than 21 million registered members generating 1.6 billion page views per day (Ekeanyanwu, 2015, p.187). Founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, this social network site was formerly named the facebook.com and was designed as a closed online social network, available only for Harvard University staff and students. Subsequently, network access has been extended to other universities and companies like Apple or Microsoft. Since 2006, Facebook provides free access regardless the membership in a university or company.

The network is based on Web 2.0 technology and is available from any computer with Internet access, providing support for other several device types, including mobile devices, benefiting from optimized software interfaces, especially designed. Users can look up for their friends from around the world and can build their own profile that can be public or private. The profile could be changed at user will or, public profiles could be blocked by the administrators if other users are reclaiming the content. Each user is allowed to post messages or photos which, also, could be public or could be addressed to a specific group or users. More recently, Facebook also provide different types of games for the users' entertainment.

**Twitter:** Twitter is a micro blogging service based on WEB 2.0 technology. The main characteristic of Twitter is the feature of transmitting short messages like SMS, up to 140 characters. Formerly, many users considered Twitter an alternative SMS service in the Internet. Being two years younger than Facebook, Twitter is online since 2006 at [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com). In the online community, the short messages transmitted through twitter are known as "tweets" and the users of Twitter "tweeters". In order to transmit a message, a user could directly access the twitter web site or could use a dedicated interface such: Twitpic, Digsby, Tweetdeck, etc. Several mobile phone operators from different countries allow the transmission of messages on Twitter network through SMS, using your mobile phone.

**WhatsApp:** Despite having been acquired by Facebook in 2014, this instant messaging platform exists as an independent entity. It arrived on the scene much later than Facebook, but has been able to capture the imagination of millions of people across the world by giving them the ability to communicate and share instantly with individuals and groups. The WhatsApp call feature is just the icing on the cake!

**Instagram:** Instagram was launched as a unique social networking platform that was completely based on sharing photos and videos. This photo sharing social networking app thus enables you to capture the best moments of your life, with your phone's camera or any other camera, and convert them into works of art. This is possible because Instagram allows you to apply multiple filters to your photos and you can easily post them to other popular social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter. It is now part of the Facebook empire.

## Social Media and Politics in Nigeria

With the emergence of social media, politicians access their supporters, examine their political relevance and acceptance or even heat the politics towards the realization of their political aspirations or ideology (Mamman, 2019). Nigerian politicians use social media to a great extent especially during elections and electoral campaigns. These politicians would write long epistles on their Facebook pages addressing an issue or stating their stand on a burning issue. The incumbents often use this medium to brief the general public on what their administration is doing to ensure the progress of the state or country. On the other hand, the opposition use it to cast aspersions on the wrong decisions and wrong steps taken by the ruling party. Be it as it may, Facebook posts by politicians would always draw support and criticisms in the comment section by the electorates who are social media users.

Politicians seldom make use of Instagram and WhatsApp unlike Facebook and Twitter. On Instagram, they usually post their campaign rallies to different parts of the state or country, usually where they were accepted. It is noteworthy to know that some crowds who welcome these politicians at campaign grounds are actually rented crowd, hence videos where they were rejected are not posted or edited to eliminate the areas where they may have received rejection. Politicians mostly use WhatsApp to create WhatsApp groups to have direct contact with heads of their campaign team according to area. They do not give out their numbers to the public, hence do not have direct contact with the electorates through WhatsApp. Politicians also use Twitter mainly for short tweets and can have direct contact with the electorates on this platform. However, some social media handles are used for the spread of fake news and hate speech in Nigeria.

## Theoretical Underpinning

The study is anchored on two theories: the technological determinism theory and the uses and gratification theory.

### Technological Determinism theory

Technological determinism has been defined as an approach that identifies technology, or technological advances, as the central causal element in processes of social change (Croteau and Hoynes, 2003, p.305). One of the basic precepts of this theory is that “all technology is communication, an extension of ourselves that allows us to reach further through time and/or space.” Technological determinism is a reductionist theory that assumes that a society's technology determines the development of its social structure and cultural values. The theory was propounded by Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), an American sociologist and economist.

According to technological determinists, particular technological development, communication technologies or media, or most broadly, technology in general are the role or prime antecedent causes of changes in society, and technology is seen as the fundamental condition underlying the pattern of social organization. Indeed, technological determinists

interpret technology in general and communication technologies in particular as the basis of society in the past, present and even in the future.

Technological determinism seeks to show technical developments, media, or technology as a whole, as the key mover in history and social change. It is a theory subscribed by “hyperglobalist” who claims that as a consequence of the wide availability of technology, accelerated globalization is inevitable. Therefore, technological development and innovation become the principal motor of social, economic or political change.

According to McLuhan (1964) we should pay attention to the form of a medium rather than the content it carries. Basically, it is the message itself when we get a message that is the message, the content rather than its form. However, McLuhan focused on the medium itself as he argued that throughout centuries the messages that are communicated among us have been less crucial than the form of its medium.

### **Uses and Gratifications**

The Uses and Gratification theory attempts to answer the questions: why do people use the mass media and what functions mass communication performs for the people?, Agbo, Ojobor and Ezinwa (2010, p.152). The theory perceives the recipient as actively influencing the effect process, since he selectively chooses, attends to, perceives and retains the media messages on the basis of his/her needs, beliefs, etc. Yahaya (2003) concluded that the theory explains the contents of the mass media and how an audience member uses the media. Uses and gratification theory (UGT) is an audience-centered approach that focuses on what people do with media, as opposed to what media does to people. This theory is audience centred, asking what people do with media rather than what the media do to people. Uses and gratification theory discusses how users deliberately choose media that will satisfy given needs and thus allow the users to enhance knowledge, relaxation, social interactional, companionship, diversion or escape (Okoye and Oparaugo, 2019).

Uses and gratification theory builds off of a history of communication theories and research. Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail laid the primary groundwork in 1969 with their categorization of audience motivations for watching political programs during the time of the 1964 election in the United Kingdom. This eventually led them to develop UGT later on with their colleagues. Uses and gratification theory seeks to understand why people seek out the media, what they do and what they use it for. UGT differs from other media effect theories in that it assumes that individuals have power over their media usage, rather than positioning individuals as passive consumers of media. UGT explores how individuals deliberately seek out media to fulfill certain needs or goals such as entertainment, relaxation, or socializing.

## Social Media and Modern Democracy

Social media has become a prominent and a powerful forum for voter enlightenment, political activism and fastest means of information dissemination. An individual without a social media account is seen in the society as obsolete. Social media has indeed become our lives personally and professionally. An average smart phone owner cannot do without visiting a social media platform daily. Social media therefore can be used effectively to target particular voters, encourage people to exercise their franchise and to make information go viral. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube help to activate citizens' engagement in political life. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) saddled with the responsibility of educating voters on their electoral roles and responsibilities unfortunately doesn't have pronounced presence in the social space.

In a modern democracy, social media can be used by governments to involve citizens in decision making, and make 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. The use of social media as a formidable force for social engineering and political electioneering has continued to grow. The technology is participatory, interactive and cost-effective. This has made it the medium of the moment as far as political communication and participation are concerned.

The role of youth in electoral activities cannot be over emphasised. They play active role in mobilising support for candidates and actual voting. They are the active participants of election violence and also the active users of social media. Disseminating useful information to youth in form of voter education is a means of forestalling incidences of election violence and electoral manipulations.

Data released by statista.com indicated that there are 84.3 million internet users in Nigeria and that by 2019, there would be 93 million internet users. Chukwuemeka Afigbe, Manager Developer programme at Facebook revealed that about 26 million Nigerians may experience strong adverse effects. On the contrary, its correct functioning and pliability is transforming modern society with exceptional pecuniary and social benefits. With many activities increasingly moving to the Internet, cyberspace has become a new stage for innovations, enterprises, social networking, criminality and war.

## Social Media and Elections

Election is the methods of selecting individuals who are (or not) members of political parties into the legislative and executive arms of government (s). Obingene and Okonkwo (2008, p.229) posit that "election is a process through which people are placed into offices either as legislators or executives". According to Abonyi (2005), election is "the process of choice agreed upon among members of a group who have accepted to co-habit or function as a unit for the purpose of periodically selecting those to lead other members of the said group or those to occupy authority positions. Elections could be defined as an agreed process of democratic choice of

formation recruitment of persons into public offices based on mutually accepted sets of rules and regulations.

However, the application of social media in elections appears to be significantly altering the traditional practice of electioneering. This phenomenon which is fast gaining momentum is founded on the rapidly expanding access to Internet, increased availability of Internet-ready Smart phones and other communication devices that are fast penetrating into most societies. This access enables individuals to simultaneously share information with their peers, which in turn spreads information faster than the traditional media channels would otherwise have done.

The increasing penetration of internet and telephone technology has culminated in an embrace of social media platforms by the Nigerian electorates, especially the youths who are increasingly becoming very vibrant and technology savoir-faire. To connect with this target group, Nigerian politicians had no choice but to leverage on the media platform through which they could be reached easily (Alakali, Akpan and Tarnongo, 2013).

The power of the new media for information sharing and mobilization for action is lucidly exemplified by the much cited Arab Spring that began in December of 2010 and swept dictators of long standing out of power sometimes with disastrous consequences for the dictator: Ben Ali of Tunisia went into exile, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt endured months of humiliating show trial along with his two sons and was finally sentenced to do time in prison, and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya was killed by the same long-suffering Libyan people that he for decades subjugated (Ekwenchi and Udenze, 2014).

Politicians have swerved from the use of the old media such as the print (newspapers) and the electronic media (television and radio), to the use of the new media during electioneering to actualize their political goals (Ekwueme and Folarin, 2017). Today, politicians have embraced the use of Social Media, which is one of the fastest ICT tools in the 21st century to carry out their campaign aspiration. This was clearly depicted by the Obama campaign in 2008, as social media was a major tool in his campaign. "During the 2008 presidential campaign of the then Senator Barack Obama, social media sites and content (such as YouTube videos, Facebook Fan Pages, Twitter accounts, etc.) were used to reach out to constituents and electorates with an exceptional success rate" (Carpenter, 2009 as cited in Mergel 2013, p.9).

Hybrid features of online media outlets are assets to politicians in both developed and developing democracies because they provide unlimited access to different categories of target audience (Okoye and Oparaugo, 2019). The new media in Nigeria are increasingly being used to provide contact information about politicians. They are also being used to spread campaign message during election. The internet provides the gateway for reaching every class especially the youths who also share a high degree of political awareness (Okoye and Oparaugo, 2019).

As pointed out by Hinton & Hjorth (2013, p.2), "Social Media influence the way we think, experience and practice 'online media'. It is no longer a mere form of teen socializing- it has become an essential part of our everyday life which has influenced how we reflect and engage with friends, family, colleagues and even do politics." No one doubts that the primary function



of social media — Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Youtube, and so on- is to connect people through interactive mediated platforms so they can share information. In the process, social networks are created, some temporarily and others permanently, often for specific purposes. But we also know that the use to which technology is put often depends on the users and the purpose. One of the major uses of the social media in recent years is the mediation of the political process and discourse.

All over the world, social media provides platforms for politicians to disseminate information in their bid to recruit supporters and donors. The advantage of social media for them lies in the opportunity of direct communication with supporters, by sidetracking regulated mainstream media such as radio, television, newspapers, and magazines as well as press conferences. In the process, issues raised in mainstream media and on political campaigns are subjected to discussion and recast or repackaged in new light on social media.

Supporters and opponents of particular issues and arguments are then given the opportunity on various social media platforms to participate in unregulated debate from their own private space. As a result, multiple voices are heard that otherwise would have been silent. The danger of social media however, lies in this repackaging process and the lack of regulation. Unlike mainstream media, which are regulated by ethical codes of conduct, the law, and the courts, social media are largely unregulated. Most of their practitioners often have no formal training and so lack professional ethics. They are, therefore, free to recast issues to suit their understanding, wishes, and dreams. In some cases, conspiracy theories are created in the process of recasting issues, leading to the emergence of angry, partisan supporters, who pursue theories to extreme limits, while opponents also come up with their own alternative theories.

The consequence is extreme verbal thuggery in which opponents haul invectives at one another. Examples abound across the globe of extremists who snap in pursuance of conspiracy theories, by transforming verbal thuggery into physical thuggery, and then going on to commit violent acts.

### **Social Media and Political Communication**

The emergence of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, as arenas for political communication has the potential to expand the possibilities for political talk among citizens (e.g. Robertson et. al 2010). Together with the mass media and personal networks, social media comprise the information milieu that shapes citizens' political preferences and actions. As mass media, social media, and face-to-face networks are complementary intermediaries for transmitting political information, whether and how political messages circulate across offline and online social networks becomes an important question. The Internet gateways or more precisely the new media are seen as public sphere facilitating debate, interaction and articulation of problems. Social media has transformed political communication in a number of ways, like segmentation of audience, weakening gatekeeping capacity of traditional media, releasing most recent news and influences socio-economic

and political settings.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Social media has great impact on the voting pattern of the electorates, especially youths who constitute the largest proportion of social media users in Nigeria. Social media aids politicians in establishing a more direct contact with the voters. Social media helps politicians rebuild their public images. We therefore, recommend that:

1. Nigeria's political leaders and future aspirants should desist from using the social media to spread false stories, hate speeches, caricature figures etc. on other candidates that will destroy their public image. Rather, they should portray what they have to offer to the masses.
2. Modalities should be put in place to monitor the wrong use of the social media by politicians especially for checkmating incessant fake results circulating on the social media.
3. Nigerian electorates should be encouraged to embrace the positive use of the social media so as to remain updated on information that has to do with election.
4. The social media should only be used for . campaign and mobilization purposes and not a platform for encouraging electoral violence by rival political parties.

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**Conflict of Interest**

The researcher's last association with any tertiary institution (either as a part time, full time or contract staff) ended in 2016, and as such, the researcher has not received any financial support as salary, grants, loan or debt owed since then. The research was not influenced by any external body or influence.

**Disclaimer Statement:**

This paper is the product of a professional research and the views contained represent the opinion of the author and has not been influenced by any party, candidate or political organization. The views here are clearly the author's objective observations and submission. Any opinions, recommendations in this article are that of the author and do not reflect the opinion of the editorial team of the journal.

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