



NEW MEDIA AND ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT

The rising profile of the use of internet across the globe in the 21st century has made many to be aware of the global development towards the new media. This upsurge without doubt, has become potent instrument for deepening democratic values and processes in terms of information dissemination, evaluation and monitoring of electioneering processes in Africa in particular and the world at large. This paper therefore, explores the extent of improvement in the conduct of elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic essentially the 2015 and 2019 with the emergence of new media as the primary means by which people create a public sphere where they communicate and form public opinion. The paper reveals that the new media triggered a revival of the watchdog function of the media and paved the way for it to act as a Fourth Estate in monitoring electioneering processes. It reveals further that the various networking platforms of the new media had created a multiple forum where live discussions/debates take place on many issues still considered off limits to traditional media. The study relies on secondary sources of data through the use of websites (online) news portals.

Keywords: New Media, Elections, Democracy, Fourth Republic

INTRODUCTION

The exponential growth in internet usage and/or advancement in Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the 21st century had created a lot of awareness on the global development towards the new media. Over the last few decades, there has been a change in the way people access, consume, and produce media: a shift away from traditional media and towards internet-based content- social media. This developmental shift according to Frentasia (2012), is fascinating because it differs in three important ways: one, it is able to facilitate two-way interaction with a large number of people at the same time; two, political actors are connected with one another directly without middlemen that control contents; and three, popular social media websites are free to join, making the cost of usage very low by modern standard (cited in Omede and Alebiosu, 2015:272). As with all communications technology, the emergence of the new media (known as social media) in elections has become a critical part of the principle of democracy in our present day society. This is because political and electioneering campaigns are now increasingly built around technology strategies rather than traditional broadcast. The internet-based media offers many additional groups with cheap access to the public sphere and new possibilities to information and discussion across the universe. The ability to find, analyze and apply personal information from 'big data' is becoming more important than 'market research'¹ (see www.jip-online.org) and the focus has shifted to the

¹See, the flier of The Institute for Information Policy at Penn State, the Department of Communication and Media Research- DCM at the University of Fribourg and the Journal of Information Policy, are pleased to announce this call for paper proposals on: New Media, Old Money, Digital Technology, Social Media and the New Challenges to Campaigning and Democracy. A by-invitation experts' workshop to be held at the Embassy of Switzerland in the United States of America Washington, DC, September 27-29, 2015.



development of comprehensive new media strategies for young, old, ethnic, gender, educated, non-educated and spatial interest groups across the globe. Today, political communication not only incorporate traditional advertising but equally spend more on internet and social networking platforms and the use of information technology to identify and reach voters through multiple platforms- Facebook, Twitter, YouTube (video-sharing) etc. Interestingly, the social media are changing the way people organize, mobilize and protest. It has become a primary means by which people create a public sphere where they communicate and form public opinion, thereby becoming the most accessible source of information and veritable instruments for the deepening of democratic principles and processes in terms of information sharing, monitoring and evaluation of electioneering processes, reduction of tension and anxieties associated with elections, ensuring and even enforcing transparency and accountability to a large extent. This in turn has made scholars of politics and communication studies such as Freedman, (2014) and Sorensen, (2015) to begin to ask and say- if the internet affords everyone the chance to say whatever they want, then how do we make sense of everything that is out there? While traditional media such as newspaper, television and radio give small number of people the opportunity to speak to millions, and millions now have the opportunity to say whatever they want through the social media. It is therefore based on this backdrop that the paper discusses the new media vis-à-vis its impact on the general elections which constitute a watershed in the democratic history of Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

There are many theories that explain the role of the social media particularly in elections. But for the purpose of this study, social responsibility theory is more appropriate owing to the fact the theory propagates the right of the media to criticize any institution and even government, but it must be responsible enough to maintain the stability of the society. The central focus of the theory therefore is the enhancement of public interest. This involves encouraging media freedom and transmitting fair and accurate information that articulates a debate and democratic decision-making in order to unveil what constitute the interest of the public. It should be noted that:[...] whatever the argument about the concept of public interest, it is quite obvious that the mass media have everywhere been a subject of extensive control and regulation by the law and other formal or informal means, with a view to getting them to do what society wants or to prevent them from doing what it doesn't (McQuail, 2007:165). The social responsibility theory, however, owes its origin to the Hutchin commission on the freedom of press. The commission was set up in the United States of America in 1947 to examine the concept of free press as understood within the libertarian or free press theory. Thus, the hallmark of public interest within the purview of this theory is press/media freedom and liberty. In examining the level of public interest, the following requirements among others needs to be stressed: Freedom of publication; plurality of ownership of the mass media; diversification of information, opinion and culture; support for public order and security of the state; quality of information published to the public; adequate support for democratic political system;



respect for individuals and general human rights; avoidance of harm and offence to the society and individuals; and professionalism and accountability should be upheld by the media (Senam and Udo, 2015). The theory according to Christian (2004) allows for objectivity and accountability of the media and also encourages professionalism in media reportage while Senam (2014) describes the theory as an emerging multi-media society providing the enabling environment for the media based on assumption that the media should be free and it must nonetheless be responsible. Thus, this theory is relevant to the study in the sense that everyone who has something to say should be heard and the media should exhibit a high sense of commitment to the cause of the public and the society as a whole which the theory emphasizes. This would enable the media to contribute meaningfully to democratic governance in the society.

A Discourse on New Media

A shift away from traditional media towards internet-based content has created a lot of awareness on the global trend towards the new media- social media. This awareness generated a lot of intellectual discussions among scholars across the globe in a view to assessing how effectively new media could serve as a catalyst for entrenching democracy. Arguably, the direct or indirect effects/consequences of the new media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube as well as blogging environments and online discussions on political processes remain controversial and not well understood. Much discourse in this field seems to be driven as much by political ideology itself, as it does by rigorous academic enquiry. Meanwhile, the issue of social media and its role in social development overall is no longer merely a question that refers to one territory or related to a particular sphere, but it has become present in different spheres as a powerful factor of change transforming into new mass self-communication (Castells, 2009:58-71). There may be a strong will then to believe that these social media are indeed making political processes more democratic, and yet the evidence may not always be there to support such assertions. Significantly, there are popular activists who seek to propagate the view that major political changes, such as those in the Middle East since 2010, can indeed be seen as a direct result of the use of social media, and are a veritable 'Facebook Revolution' (Huffington, 2011). In contrast are those who see governments and large private sector corporations as increasingly using social media and the internet as a means of surveillance and maintaining ever-increasing control over citizens (Kelly and Cook, 2011). Also, Loader and Mercea (2012:10) have suggested, on the one hand, there is often an assumption that 'the widespread use of the internet for social networking, blogging, video-sharing and tweeting has an elective affinity with participatory democracy'. They further suggested that "such optimistic claims for the political benefit of social networking are in sharp contrast to much of the mainstream academic discourse surrounding the prospects for digital democratic governance".

The capability of the social media to bring about societal transformation, promotion and advancement of democracy is not in doubt. The problem and lack of regulation and control of the social media have also made some scholars (Omede and Alebiosu, 2015) to perceive it has a threat to democratic societies. This is why attempts are being made (particularly



in the face of Arab spring) to come up with policies and legal framework to restrict the use of the social media. George (2003), however noted that the inherent characteristics of the Internet and the economic benefits associated with the adoption of the technology makes it difficult for the government to regulate social media in the same way that it did with traditional media such as print and broadcast. On a global scene, it could be argued that the issue of, and application of new media has an increasing importance due to latest revolutions in Arab world, 2010-2011. As social and political unrest continues in some countries, new media may become a powerful tool for reaching particular goals. In contrast, the social media communicated to the public a lot of information that could have caused unrest (Miswardi, nd) in some unstable nations. In Nigeria, for instance, the social media gave reasons for the postponement of the election from February 14th, 2015 to March 28th, 2015 aside from the unpreparedness of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Reasons that made the public believed that the postponement was to the benefit of the ruling party as it would provide the opportunity for the ruling party to manipulate (by rigging) the election in such a way that the power of the electorate would amount to nothing. This kind of report can cause disorderliness in volatile countries like Nigeria.

Notably, the social media pass information freely, because they are unregulated. The information can come in the form of broadcast on social media application, like WhatsApp and BBM, blogs; or even text messages. With the unregulated nature of the social media, it is certain that many of the information are not subject to scrutiny and may be fabricated, which results to misrepresentation, or even misinformation. Also, the information on the social media tends to be biased, presumptuous, and might even be tentative. Aside from these, the population of bloggers is uncontrolled as many have the ability to create blogs and channels (Ajayi and Adesote, 2015), where information can be circulated. Unfortunately, the majority of the accessible populations to this information are unaware of these maladies. Pertinently, there has been recognition that social media has become one of the most accessible sources of information in the present day society. It plays more important and significant roles in social, economic and political developments through wireless communication and the gradual diffusion of greater broadband capacity with highly developed mobile technologies and the communications and information-processing power of the Internet.

In summary, there is need for us to emphasize that new media (technology) is not an autonomous power that can inherently be used for 'good' or 'bad'. There is strong evidence that technologies have usually been shaped and used by those in power to maintain their positions of power (Habermas, 1978; Unwin, 2009). Equally, the social media (through Facebook, twitter, YouTube etc.) has empowered the citizens to question any anti-people policy. It has opened up avenues for people to connect, communicate and participate in the governance of their country, as well as serve as a revolutionary tool that has made a better and greater increase in the demand for transparency, accountability and democratic reforms for a better society.



The Emergence of New Media in Nigeria

Historically, media has been evolving since the dawn of human interaction. Though, there has been a change over the last decade in the way people access, consume and produce media, that is, a shift away from traditional media and toward internet-based content, new media. This shift only revolutionized many aspects of human interaction through several social networking platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, internet service among others. Today, social media has become an intrinsic part of humans' day-to-day lives of communicating with large audience at a given point in time. In Africa, the emergence of social media in this 21st century is a major trend that has changed the interaction, communication and sharing of information among Africans across the globe. The influx of these new media platforms have continued to transform the way people communicate with one another around the world. The Internet-based communication and mobile phone penetration rates, in particular, have resulted in a glut of ideas for new media platforms aimed at bridging the information divide between the well-connected and the disconnected (Unwin, 2012:7). Both the internet-based communication and the mobile phones provide exhilarating new opportunities for one-to-one as well as one-to-many communication. The much reported rapid spread of social media connectivity and services, as well as different forms of public and shared internet access have allowed a growing number of people who may not have access to a computer or a fixed connection to take part in 'the global conversation' (André-Michel, 2010:4).

Undoubtedly, the new waves of media in politics have continued to grow in many parts of Africa, particularly Nigeria in the 21st century. The role of social media networks (such as mobile phones' MMS, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter amongst the most visited websites in Nigeria) in deepening the democratization of Nigeria in recent times cannot be overemphasized. For instance, the 2015 and 2019 general elections amidst other elections in Nigeria witnessed a massive use of mobile phones' SMS, MMS, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Considering the participatory, interactive and cost-effective nature of social media networks; it has become veritable instruments for carrying out election campaigns and other electioneering activities, political engagement and mobilization among others. Empirically, during the 21st century, Nigeria has witnessed a rapid growth in internet usage. From a modest 200,000 users in 2000, by 2015 around thirty percent (30%) of the population use the internet of which seventy percent (70%) are using social media (see Bartlett et' al, 2015: 4&10; and <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm>). These changes the way Nigerian people get their news, and learn about issues. Thus, the Nigerian Communications Commission- NCC (2015) opined that 'there are a total of 186,410,197 active mobile lines in Nigeria as of February 2015, a two-fold increase from the 93 million reported in 2011 by Miniwatts Marketing Group' (see www.ncc.gov.ng/index.php?option=com; and Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012). Much of this increase is driven by a growth in mobile web access. A Gallup poll from 2012 found that almost seventy-three percent (73%) of Nigerians owned a mobile phone as at 2012 and that figure is expected to be over eighty percent (80%) in 2015 (cited in Bartlett et' al, 2015). The Mobile Africa 2015 study, which surveyed 3,500 mobile users in five countries across Africa, reported that forty-seven percent (47%) of Nigerians used their phone to access



the internet² thereby making social media networking platforms to be used for lots of reasons in Nigeria. For instance, on Facebook, the most popular pages in Nigeria include Kaymu (an online marketplace), Naij and Information Nigeria (news agencies), Pastor Enoch Adeboye (Christian preacher), P-Square and Young Paperboyz (popular Nigerian musicians), Omotola Jolada (Nollywood actress) and Goodluck Jonathan. While the most popular Twitter accounts, by contrast, are almost exclusively Nigerian musicians and music producers. The most popular politician on Twitter (with 455,986 followers at the time of writing) as at 2015 is Babatunde Fashola, the former governor of Lagos state, who was much acclaimed for his work on tackling traffic problems, crime and poor infrastructures in Lagos state, Nigeria (see www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/nigeria/page-10-14/).

Thus, the high-minded position of social media in Nigerian society and public life can also be seen from the changing nature of news websites. The third most visited site in Nigeria, Sahara Reporters, relies heavily on reporting by citizen-journalists for its content and has been at the forefront of publishing multimedia content on social platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and YouTube. Its popularity as a news platform (with over 1.5 million likes on Facebook) is evidence to the influence that social media can have (Bartlett et' al, 2015). Apart from these social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube), Nigerians also have a strong presence on platforms such as *zgo*- a South African social networking site, and *Eskimi*- a mobile social network and media platform with a reported nine million members as of 2014 (Bartlett et' al, 2015; See also <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/19/social-media-plays-key-role-in-nigerian-elections.html>).

New Media and Nigeria's 2015 and 2019 General Elections

In the history of elections in Nigeria, the 2015 and 2019 general elections witnessed a massive use of mobile phones' SMS, MMS, Facebook, YouTube, Whats'app and Twitter as major social networking platforms in communicating with a large number of people across the globe. These social networking platforms were felt in the electioneering processes-campaign, and eventually the polling procedures. Though, new media first became noticeable in the preparations for the 2011 general elections. In a review of these elections, the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2012) documented at least three main ways in which Nigerians were using social media. First, to share information relating to the elections which included the development of novel technologies such as *Revoda*, a mobile application which enabled a parallel vote count, access to polling unit results, transmission of collated results and additional information about the entire electoral process. This mobile application allowed people to access data and information in real time.

²<http://www.itnewsafrika.com/2015/04/study-reveals-african-mobile-phone-usage-stats/>. The most common mobile activities reported in Nigeria were using Facebook (58 percent), browsing the internet (47 percent), sending SMS (39 percent), listening to the radio (36 percent), instant messaging (34 percent), playing games (34 percent), downloading apps (28 percent) and using Twitter (14 percent).



Second, social media platforms were used by political parties, candidates and governmental organizations for campaigning and increasing level of awareness. For instance, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) used the opportunity to develop its communication channels and engage citizens through Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. INEC's Situation Room was also established, enabling people to directly contact the commission to report misconduct and concerns about the poll.

Third, to improve the efficiency of election observation, Nigerians were able to share information and pictures such as results from their polling units. Although this may not have prevented malpractice and falsification of results, it meant that the public was aware of the trends in different locations and more likely to challenge any falsified results. Civil society organizations were also instrumental in leading campaigns for transparency and accountability, as demonstrated by projects such as *Reclaim Naija*, an election incident reporting system that allowed feedback to be easily aggregated and analyzed. This allowed Nigerians to report incidents of violence and electoral malpractices through text messages. Based on the reasons above, it could be observed that the social media became more potent tool and even a more lethal weapon for political communication. In the 2015 and 2019 general elections, for instance, there were releases in the form of videos, voice notes, headlines, and broadcasts that made and mar many political parties and individuals³ (Bartlett et' al, 2015; Ajayi, nd). That is, it was used for campaigns via personal websites, blogs, all social media applications, and several other media. Likewise, it was used as a weapon to undermine and even destroy the image of other political parties.

Thus, the 2015 and 2019 general elections witnessed an increase in the use of social media by political parties to branch out into other medium to engage voters. For instance, the front running parties (APC and PDP precisely) staged 'Google Hangouts', in which candidates answered questions from young Nigerians. Aside this, the APC on its part tried to crowd source funding using a mobile platform, designed to tap into the social media networks of its supporters to raise money for campaigns. StateCraft, a Lagos-based communications company, was responsible for All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate, Muhammadu Buhari's digital drive intended to appeal to younger people. While a Social Media Week- an international conference focused on change in social media technologies in Lagos was designed to support the former President Jonathan's continuity agenda and it was chaired by his Senior Special Assistant on social media, Obi Asika. In the 2019 general elections, all the social media platforms usable in Nigeria were actively campaigning for political parties of their choice and their candidates essentially President Muhammadu Buhari of APC and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of PDP. Citizen journalism and observers often find their ways into the mainstream news as media organizations increasingly invited their subscribers to report on online platforms in the 2015 and 2019 general elections. One noticeable feature of this was the expanded use of hashtags (#) as flashpoints for political discussion and advocacy. Hashtagging in this

³A hate video was broadcasted on both General Muhammadu Buhari and Senator Ahmed Bola Tinubu. Ordinarily, these videos might have ended the political ambitions of these individuals in some other places.



way became a way of identifying political affiliation and support for candidates among the electorate. It was observed that between 40 and 50 active hashtags linked to Nigerians actively discussing the elections were identified on the eve of the 2015 and 2019 general elections respectively, (www.premiumtimesng.com/features-and-interviews/179304-nigerias-election-who-is-winning-the-twitter-war-by-tobi-oluwatola-2.html/attachment/3-6). Social media in the 2015 and 2019 general elections provides politicians with the opportunity to be free with and accessible to the general public through the creation of online platforms that serve as where people resort to and participate in a political discourse. This is in line with a view that social media platforms have become a main source of personal orientation, anonymous interactivities and social community on variety of issues that involve politics and political discourse (Kweon and Kim, 2010). It has the capacity of boosting participation (Mayfield, 2010 and Bradley, 2009) because of its openness, interactive nature, connectedness, textual and audio-visual characteristics appeal. The press was also not left out of this latest platform of networking. Not only does Nigeria now have many newspapers, magazines and radio stations online, journalists are now regularly exposed to ICT-based capacity development programs. For instance, in April 2014, a 2-day Editors Lab Hackdays workshop sponsored by Google was organized by Global Editors Network (GEN) in conjunction with Vanguard Newspapers on the theme: “*New ways to cover elections online and through social media*” (Arenyeka, 2014). In this workshop, participants were taken through some fundamentals of Google applications like Google search, display ads, knowledge panel, modifiers, conversion, Google scholar, Google translate, Google trends, YouTube, Google maps, and Google streaming before they were directed to develop digital tools for journalists. This was informed by the notion that the new media tools would play a significant role in changing age-old election habits. It is therefore, observed that the networking platform caught not just Nigerian politicians but journalists as well who were preparing ahead to give unprecedented reportage to ensure free, fair and transparent elections through the innovative use of social media in the 2015 and 2019 general elections. Importantly, the social media extended beyond the 2015 and 2019 polling days. Following the presidential inauguration, Nigerians posted tweets that included the hashtag-#BuhariFix. This is to offer their suggestions for the priorities of Buhari’s first term in office in 2015 and his second term NextLevel. The Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa also developed an app, ‘the Buharimeter’ (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles>) designed to track the progress of electoral promises and provide a forum for political discussion. Civic technology organization with *BudgIT* began social media campaign- #OpenNASS, which calls for transparency and publication of the full details of the expenditure by the National Assembly to encourage openness in the new government (<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles>).

On the other hand, the message on the 2015 and 2019 elections and/or its outcome by the new media tends to trigger electoral violence. This is because several unguarded utterances were attributed to the candidates; some politicians were accused of using derogatory hints to incite the public to violence (*Sahara Reporters*, 2015; 2019; *Nigeria FM*, 2015; 2019). There were text messages that stir up Muslims against President



Jonathan in some parts of the north where the anti-Jonathan rhetoric in the north hardened the stance of many southerners against Buhari, setting up inevitable clash between followers of Buhari's party and Jonathan's party. Also, there were partisan reporting stories with sensational headlines such as 'The North is against Jonathan' and 'The South is against Buhari' (Nnamani, 2014). These provoking stories before and during election charged the tempo and incited supporters to violence. In spite the above, the social media play pivotal roles in exposing potentially violent comments, and action before they get out of control. Social media seems to be more effective, because they have no speculated time for news or information; rather it is round the clock official and unofficial news channel. As a result, social media have the ability to serve two edged purposes (Miswardi, nd) to the electorate and eventually to the public during the electoral process. This invariably has made more people switching to this new media for information as they spend more time in the virtual platform (Nielsen, 2012 cited in Adedeji, 2015). In this respect, Collin, Rahilly, Richardson, and Third (2011) highlighted the benefits of the social media to include media literacy, education, creativity, individual identity and self-expression, strengthening of interpersonal relationships, sense of belongingness, and collective identity, strengthening and building of communities, civic engagement and political participation and well-being. Indeed, the social media to a large extent fulfilled all these roles in the 2015 and 2019 general elections with a number of shortcomings.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues that the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria witnessed a massive use of new media networking platforms (Facebook, YouTube and Twitter) in communicating with a large number of people across the globe. These social networking platforms were felt in the electioneering processes-campaign, and eventually the polling procedures. The platforms triggered a revival of the watchdog function of the media and paved the way for it to act as a Fourth Estate of the Realm in monitoring and educating individuals on electioneering processes across the country. The release of the 2015 general elections results and that of the 2019 via new media platforms seems to have increased political participation as most people had first-hand results before the final release. These results were not just transmitted from the new media blogs, but also re-circulated via social networking sites and applications. This therefore added value to Nigeria's 2015 and 2019 general elections and facilitated other issues that might have ensued from the electoral process. Though, it is of the fact to say that the message on the 2015 and 2019 general elections and the outcome by the new media tends to trigger electoral violence. This is because several unguarded utterances were attributed to the candidates; some politicians were accused of using derogatory hints to incite the public to violence through various platforms of the new media networks. But it represents a veritable avenue for both politicians and electorate to have become more than just passive consumers of digital messages through the widespread use of the internet for social networking, blogging, video-sharing and tweeting which has a functional relationship with participatory democracy required for electioneering processes in the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria.



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