

Digital Media, Global Platforms and Political Engagement: A Study of Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election

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Introduction

The use of the digital media since the turn of the millennium cannot be overemphasized. As it has overtime opened new opportunities especially political participation and civic engagements in advanced and emerging democracies. Consequently, internet-enabled mobile phones allow youths to go online to participate in politics. This new mode of virtual political interaction is creating a new space for accelerated engagements between politicians and citizens in most democratic cultures across the globe. Specifically, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram are the most popularly used social media for online political participation by Nigerian Youths (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Uzochukwu, Patricia & Ukueze, 2014; Olabamy, 2014). Thus, digital media became a veritable tool for conventional media. This has also garnered interested global watchdogs to be active players during Nigerian Elections. It has heralded a shift in youth political participation in Nigeria (Titus Fannie, Akpan & Tarnongo, 2013).

However, digital media play pivotal role in online political participation for several reasons. Most importantly it exposes citizens to political information hence proving a 100% for communication. It creates options political engagement and reduces the cost of participation significantly both in terms and effort. It also provides opportunity for interactivity between political elite and citizens albeit mediated, while at the same time making the political system seem more accessible to ordinary citizen. Cab (2017) observes that the increasing use of digital media by political parties, advocacy groups and general citizens has provided a new environment for communication and interaction. Scholars (e.g. Zappavyia 2013, Opeibi, 2015) now believe that these new media technologies has now made several people across temporal, spatial, cultural and political boundaries more interconnected.

Nevertheless, Studies over time have observed that the emerging trends in the proliferation and use of web-based media have serious implications for the growth and stability of democracy in Africa. For example Batista (2003) observes that Information Communication Technology will invigorate political relations by allowing direct citizen participation in government. These digital technologies will remove unnecessary mediations and also assist in optimizing the representative process while expanding participative democracy.

It is important to state that digital media in the political environment has benefited immensely as it has enjoyed greater acceptability following the vital role it played during the 2012 fuel subsidy protest in Nigeria not forgetting the Arab Spring. During the 2011 presidential election, Nigerian politicians used new media as a veritable tool for political communication. It became an instrument to set a new political discourse agenda by engaging political violent and citizens. This new media afforded politicians to opportunity to rebrand the political identify and broadcast their political message to a wider audience online. Unlike in traditional media, information on new media is to heterogonous audience and less expensive (Bimber, 2000)

hence it enables to create, distribute and exploit knowledge and information (Hamid & Mustsffa, 2007). Supporting this view, Norins (2001a, 2001b) note that the new media provides for freedom to access vast amount of information hence providing those (e. g. Youths and minority political groups) sideline by conventional media a source of political information. The 2015 general elections in Nigeria was basically the 5th quadrennial election to take place since the end of military rule in 1999. Nigeria being a country that operates a multi-party system, over forty registered political parties is in existence. Although, there are two major political parties; the all progressive congress (APC) dominated Nigeria Political discourse online. Expanding outside of (purely) political websites, social media tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, Mobile Telephone SMS, among others, were incorporated into the campaign tool repetitive. The new President, Mr. Muhammadu Buhari (APC), a latecomer to the digital political, discursive practices even created both personal twitter handle and in order to promote his presidential ambition. He utilized these platforms both in 2015 and 2019 general elections. He used new media in massively to mobilize violate during the electioneering campaigns. It is important to note that digital media not only foster global interactions with Nigerians in the Diaspora and their likes. It has become a platform where political information (Kaye, 2010) likewise a means of gathering information (Dimitrova, shehata, storm back, & Noid, 2014; Gill de Zuniga Copeland & Bimber, 2013 & Towner, 2014). This new trend has enabled a significant number of youths to access political information as well as discusses politics online thereby increasing their political knowledge. Accordingly, Valenzuela (2013) notes that, expression on new media enable individuals to grapple with ideas and clarify arguments, hence making it a rich form of political information. Seemingly, the primary role of media in any society is to inform citizens (Dimitrova et al, 2014) because knowledgeable citizens who are well informed politically are those who participate in politics.

However, from a cognitive engagement theory (CET) perspective (Inglehart, 1977), political participation is as a result of a citizen's access to information, political interest, political knowledge and policy satisfaction.

Therefore, the lesser the cost of access to information, the more citizens consume information from the media and the higher the level of political knowledge and interest among citizens, which further leads to increase in political participation (Charles, 2010).

Thus, constructs of CET (Access to Information, Political Interest, Policy Satisfaction and Political Participation) will be investigated with political knowledge as moderator. Political Knowledge was introduced as a moderator in this study. It is important to state that not research studies hardly use political knowledge as a moderator variable. Which is basically an independent variable (Carpini & Keiter 1996; Charle, 2010) or dependent variable? The important thing to note is that moderators are categorical or metric variables that could change either the strength or the direction of the relationship between two constructs in a research model and this is what study experiments the effect of political knowledge on the relationship between access to political information, political interest, policy satisfaction and online political participation of Youth on Digital Media in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Nigeria being a country made up of people from different ethnic colorations has a need to interact through a medium other than the traditional media which has its own limitations. Naughton (1999) opines that:

The internet is one of the most remarkable things human being ever made. In terms of its impact on society, it ranks with print, the railways, the telegraph, the automobile, electric power and television. Some would equate it with print and television, the two earlier technologies, which most transformed the communication environment in which people live (p. 21-22).

Digital Media increase Citizens Political awareness as well as creating formidable room for global interactions. This enables political voters to cultivate rational thinking capability as they exchange information with elites on policy and in the process changing how they participate in politics. (Uzochkwu & Ekwugha, 2014).

Being a knowledgeable citizen is likely to form a better opinion on issues and as such vote effectively (Neil, 2006). This aforementioned statement shows that there is a positive knowledge between knowledge and act of voting. Furthermore, Enjoral, Steen-Johnson and Wolleback, (2013) observe that youths found Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to be important as they made access and dissemination of news and political information easier.

Ross and Burger (2014) assert that, Facebook and Twitter have positively affected political participation.

Meanwhile, informational use of Social Media for political participation such as reading political news has a significant effect on political knowledge and participation (Fraile, 2011; Dimitrova et al., 2014).

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on two theories of Mass Communication known as Democratic – participation Media Theory and Technological Determinism Theory. The Democratic – participant Media Theory operates on the principles of individuals and citizen’s right to access the media, and the rights to be served by media according to their own determination of need. The content and organization of media should not be manipulated or under state or political control. Also media should exist primarily for their audiences and not clients of the media or political heavy weights. The theory suggests digital media that would accommodate participatory communication engagement of the citizens in the political development. It is relevant to this study as it encourages the use of the digital media of communication for the political needs of the people cutting across every divide of the society.

The technological determinism theory is also relevant to this study as the advent of digital media platforms has democratized access to information and political engagement.

The digital media as an answer to the technological determinism theory have redefined the political media platform as the citizenry have capitalized on the avalanche of the digital prospects to a greater advantage to engage in participatory policies.

Methodology

The research design for this study was the survey which sought the peoples opinion on the use of digital media during the 2019 General elections. The data collected were systematically analyzed considering the given population and their responses to the issue under investigation. The population for this study involved staff and students of the Department of Mass Communication and Political Science of Rhema University Aba and Abia State Polytechnic, Aba. The choice of the population was based on the fact that the students and staff of the departments are familiar with the topic of investigation which is the 2019 General Elections and the digital media.

The sample of the study was based on 2018/2019 academic session and 200 students randomly selected from the first years to the final years. The questionnaire was the instrument for data collection. It personally was administered collected data were analyzed using simple percentages.

Data Analysis

The study revealed that a significant 92% of the respondents use the digital media with only 8% do not use the digital media. In response to the question on the digital media that appealed to them, 76% of the respondents preferred Facebook, 4% preferred the twitter, 8% preferred

Youtube while 12% preferred the Instagram. The reasons given for their preference was for the accessibility, interactivity, topicality of information, entertainment function, its global viewpoint, cheap to operate, enlightenment, mobility, educative, effective communication, connecting to long lost friends, audio-visual impact and for educational programmes.

72% of the respondents participated in the 2019 general elections, while 28% did not participate. In their responses on the digital media that influenced their voting decisions, 72% affirmed Facebook, 12% affirmed Twitter, 8% affirmed Youtube while 8% affirmed Instagram. On the question, Do you recommend the use of digital media in future elections in Nigeria, 100% of the respondents approved of it. The reasons stated for their approval of the use of digital media in future elections in Nigeria were as follows;

- a) It will enhance free and fair elections
- b) It will minimize electoral manipulation
- c) It will engender courage in the masses to vote without fear of intimidation and violence
- d) It will x-ray political leaders and expose non performing ones
- e) It will engage the citizens in participatory politics
- f) It will educate the citizenry on policies and programmes of government and political associations
- g) It encourages voters education.

Findings

The study made startling revelations on the impact of the digital media in political education. There is a great awareness and use of the digital media and its component forms among the citizenry. Their usage has made the digital media the flagship to clarify issues in political engagement, during campaigns, bring aspirants or candidates close to the electorate, enlighten on slogans, party ideologies and distinction between candidates to enable them make wise choice at elections.

The digital media is not only accessible but affordable to the electorates. As the purveyors of political communication and political education play distinct role in enlightening the people on how to secure their votes. In 2019, the digital media was extensively engaged in reporting results from citizenry on the spot from their polling units and collation centres. This to a large extent assisted in minimizing electoral manipulation. This study found out that digital media using the media convergences of the Internet such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Blogs among others engender political engagement, political participation and reduces apathy and malpractices in the electioneering and political process.

Conclusion

Nigeria has not fared well in its democratic experience since the first republic. However, the engagement of the citizenry through the digital media in the 2019 General Election has effectively oriented them to the highest values of their political system. The digital media as the conveyor belt of political reengineering saturated the political sphere with positive and healthy political discourse that should be entrenched in the political culture in Nigeria. Therefore, there is every need to adopt the digital media of communication in achieving the political communication needs of the people.

Recommendations

In view of the observations from the study, the researchers recommend that

- ❖ The adoption of the digital media in Nigeria's political processes in order to curtail the excesses of electoral campaigns, thuggery, hate speeches and electoral fraud.
- ❖ The engagement of the political class, in a conducive digital media discourse to temper the volatile political atmosphere.

- ❖ The electoral umpires should make effective use of the digital media, e-voting and electoral free fraud processes to check electoral manipulations.
- ❖ The need for digital literacy at all sphere of the life of the citizenry to enable them engage in the digitalization of the political sector.
- ❖ Political groups, government agencies, politicians should adopt the digital media as a more accessible and cost effective means of reaching the electorates.

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