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International Digital Organization for Scientific Research
IDOSR JOURNAL OF ARTS AND MANAGEMENT 2(3): 44-54, 2017.

ISSN: 2550-7974

The Role of Social Media in Enhancing Political Participation in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media in politics has continued to grow in recent times. Since Barack Obama broke the world record in the history of social media use for political purpose during the 2008 US presidential elections, many nations and politicians across the globe have continued to embrace the platform to mobilise their citizens and candidates towards active participation in the political process. Nigeria had the first real test of social media use for political participation during the 2011 General Elections. This study examines the experiment of social media use for political participation in Nigeria. The study was anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Findings show that the use social media has grossly affected the participation of individual in the day to day political process. As a developing country, Nigeria must embrace this platform in other to ensure greater participation of her populace in government activities.

Keywords: Social media, enhancing, political, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is widely acknowledged as the best form of government in most parts of the world today. Elections, which represent the most modern and universally accepted process through which individuals are chosen to represent a body or community in a larger entity or government is one of the cardinal features of democracy [1]. This is so because in a democracy, the authority of the government derives from the consent of the governed. This is perhaps why democracy is commonly referred to as "the government of the people by the people and for the people". Usually, a democratic election would characteristically be competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive and free and fair [2].

Nigeria's democracy may be considered nascent when compared to the older democracies of the western world. Be that as it may, the 2011 general election has gone down in the history of the country as one of the best elections in the last few years of uninterrupted civilian rule in the land.

[3], observes that one remarkable thing about the 2011 general elections was the adoption of social media especially the facebook by the politicians, the political parties and the electorates as a platform for political participation. The importance attached to social media in the 2011 general elections was better explained by President Goodluck Jonathan's 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 [4].

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. Before the advent of the new media, the older or conventional media - radio, television, newspapers, magazines, etc, ruled the world, and had directly or indirectly blocked popular participation in the electoral process. This is because there has always been scarcity of space and airtime given by the conventional media to the citizens to have their say in politics, governance and in the electoral process. Conventional media critics such as [3]; [2]; [1] cited in [5] thus believe that voters were left with paid political propaganda containing only meaningless slogans, making them disinterested and cynical about politics. They argue that there is absence of serious debate in the conventional media that could make people to learn the substance of issues and policies proposals as well as related arguments, and that this disallows citizens from participating actively in political discourse. Meanwhile, social media is interactive, web-based media. They belong to the new genre of media that focus on social networking, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information, as well as publish their own views on the internet. The ubiquitous access of these online devices no doubt, has democratising effects as they offer citizens opportunities for more fully engagement in the political process.

Writing on this development, [2] in his paper "Life in the Age of Self-Assembling message" cited in [4] observes that:

The value of the communication experience has undergone a sea-change; from the need to share it, to the need to share in it. Technology and social media in particular have brought power back to the people; with such technologies, established authorities are now undermined and users are now the experts.

This implies that people can now consume media as wanted and needed rather than allowing media producers to schedule consumption time and content. A person can now communicate to anywhere from any place at any time. Again, using social media is less expensive than the outrageous political advertisements on the older media. The new media is flexible, accessible and affordable. They promote democratisation of media, alter the meaning of geographic distance, and allow for increase in the volume and speed of communication. They are portable due to the mobile nature; they are interactive and open to all.

Nigeria experimented the use of this technology for political discourse during the 2011 general elections. The platform gave voice to many Nigerian politicians and electorates alike to make their voice heard in the electoral process. Regardless of the successes, many lapses were observed and many lessons abound for future elections in the country.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications theory. This theory is associated with the works of [3] and [5]. It belongs to the limited or indirect effect theories of mass communication. The theory according to [6] is concerned with what people do with media instead of what media do to people. The assumption is that people influence the effects media have on them. That is to say that uses and gratification theory takes a more humanistic approach to media use and effect. It assumes members of the audience are not passive but play active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. The theory suggests that people use media to fulfill specific gratifications. [7], note that the main thrust of the theory is that audience members have certain needs which make them to be selectively exposed to, attend to, and retain media messages because of the perceived gratifications derivable from such messages. Thus, this theory emphasizes the fact that people are important in the process of communication because they choose content, make meaning and act on that meaning [8].

Applying the uses and gratification theory to this study, users of social media are intentional seekers of such messages. They are able to select and use the technology in ways that suit their purpose. Thus, they as the audience are active and not passive. Similarly, political candidates are also able to select and use media of choice and message content of their choice during electoral campaigns and other electioneering activities.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The word democracy is derived from the Greek word *DemoKratia*, the root meanings of which are *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule). The contemporary studies on the theory of democracy are based on this simple etymology. Accordingly, we can literally translate democracy to be a form of government in which-contrary to monarchies and aristocraciesthe people rule. As [9] observed, democracy is that form of government in which the ruling power of a state is legally vested not in any particular class or classes but in the members of a community as a whole. It can be deduced from the foregoing, that everything about democracy revolves around the people.

The multi-faceted interpretation of rule by the people is above all being reflected in the dispute on the role of citizens- the *demos*-in democratic decision making. Citizen participation in political life is the main instrument to put government by the people into practise, thus it is the constitutive characteristics of democracy. Democracy differs from other political regimes in the way that state power is legitimized through the principle of sovereignty of the people. By participating actively in political decision- making as well as by getting involved in the formation of the collective will through articulating their interests and demands, citizens exercise their sovereign rights. In this regard, participation is the necessary link between the exercise of state power and the citizens' will. As [3] Obsereved, it is more difficult to study dictatorship than democracy because the internal politics of the formal are deliberately hidden from the public view. There is no free press, no free public opinion, no open lobbying or party competition. Democracy is seen by how much the people are carried along in the business of governing their affairs. One of the most outstanding definitions of democracy was postulated by Abraham Lincoln. He defined democracy as "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people".

It is generally believed that the concept of democracy and constitution originated from (Ancient Greek City States of Athens circa 508 B.C), which was relatively small in terms of population and landmass. Athenian democracy was quite different from the modern democratic governance. Perhaps the most important difference was that in the Athenian

state the distinction between state and society, specialized officials and citizens, or the “people” and the government was not part of the political philosophy [4]. The principle of democratic government was direct participation. The notion of an active, involved citizenry in a process of self-government was central to the understanding of governance; the governors were literally the ones to be governed. All citizens met to debate, decide, and enact the law; there was an enormous extent of political engagement see [7]. Over time, modern states system has grown, some states have an estimated population that run into hundreds of millions (e.g. China, Nigeria, USA and United Kingdom etc.) and at such, makes it very difficult and almost impossible to gather the entire population in one place at a given time to decide on a particular issue. Hence the modern state practices representative or indirect democracy and not direct democracy as was practiced in Athens.

As [10] notes, “However, government could never be constituted by the generality of the people, but in a democratic system, people govern themselves by proxy”. He further observed that, “the people were therefore governed under a framework which ensured the principle of “one man, one vote” in election and guaranteed that the custodian of the people’s mandate ruled in accordance to the general will. Stressing further [9], submits that modern democracy is representative and indirect. The people are governed through representatives periodically elected by them. He (the people) has the right to critique the Government, and influence public opinion, through freedom of speech, press and association. The effectiveness of this criticism obviously depends upon this ability and resources. It can be inferred from the forgoing that the participation of the people in politics is a necessary Sine quo non for democracy. A democratic state, seeks for the participation of the people in the activities of governance the same way a dying man seriously seeks for oxygen for survival. Democracy fails when the people are side-lined, maligned and suppressed.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION DEFINED

According to [7] political participation can be studied in many ways. It may be taken from the angle of external stimulants or compulsion by objects outside the participant, which move him to take part in political activity in one form or the other. In a simple approach, political participation is citizens’ involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection or the actions taken by political representative. It refers to the various mechanisms through which the public express their public views and exercise their influence on the political process [11]. [5] sees it as the involvement of people (not necessarily active) in any political process before a collective decision is arrived. In other words, political participation entails citizens’ engagement in the discourse of sociopolitical and economic issues which serve as yardstick for choosing would-be leaders. It may also include assessing of the incumbencies and advocating ways of ameliorating social ills for a more prosperous country.

According to [12], patterns of participation differ greatly between democratic and authoritarian government. Indeed, such contrast follows from the nature of the regimes. In established democracies, voluntary participation is the norm; people can choose whether or not to get involved (for example by voting or abstaining). Most non-democratic rulers hang a “keep out” sign over the political sphere and formal participation by ordinary people. [10], defines political participation as those action by private citizen by which they seek to influence or to support government and politics. It follows that the whole idea behind political participation is to influence the policies of government in the favour of the greater number of the people. [12], sees it as the activities by individuals formally intended to influence either who governs or the decision taken by the government.

LEVELS OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Direct participation:

This includes

- Voting and standing for election.
- Voting in a referendum
- Making contribution in a town hall meeting.
- Joint in an industrial action (strikes)
- Organized rebellion
- Mass protest and demonstration
- Revolution.

Indirect Participation

- Political discussion
- Payment of taxes
- Signing petition
- supporting boycotts

It can also be classified as:

Conventional Political Participation

This explains a participation that is in accordance with laid down rules and regulations, that uses the instruments of representative democracy to make input in governance.

Examples include:

- Voting during election
- Standing for election
- Making contribution in a town hall meeting
- Voting during referendum
- Industrial actions (strikes)

Unconventional Political Participation

This is a behaviour that defies laid down rules and regulations. It does not go through formal governmental apparatus often resulting to violence.

Examples

- Protest march
- Demonstration
- Organised rebellion
- Boycott
- Deffering government warnings
- Revolution.

SOCIAL MEDIA: ORIGIN AND NATURE

When we talk of social media, we mean those Internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. In other words, the social media are interactive web-based media platforms that offer citizens opportunity and place to connect, share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, expertise, as well as other things like job and career tips. They belong to a new genre of media that focuses on social networking allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends and share information with greater freedom as well as publish their views on issues on the World Wide Web. [11], observes that it is this interactive or collaborative nature of these tools that makes them social. [13], describes these media as “online platforms that promote participation, openness, conversation and connectedness”. [8], sees them as “social instruments of

communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers or magazines. They are online content, created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies to disseminate information across geographical boundaries, providing interaction among people [4]. They support democratisation of knowledge and information, thereby making the people both information producers and consumers.

Social media emerged with the advent of the internet and the World Wide Web. They are usually associated with the term “web 2.0” which is used to describe websites that provide opportunity for a user to interact with the sender of a message. [14] observes that “Web 2.0” refers to the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to “web1.0” which describes the state of the web prior to 2004. Web-based communities, social networking sites video-sharing sites, Wikis, and blogs, are among examples of web 2.0 sites [15].

Whenever the word “media” is used, traditionally what our subconscious minds capture is Radio and Television for electronic media while newspapers and magazine stands in for print media. According to [16], the term, new media emerged to capture a sense that looked quite rapid from the late 1980s on the world of media and communication and began to look quite differently and this difference was not restricted.

Once the concept of social media is mentioned, what comes to our mind are Facebook, Twitter, 2go, YouTube etc, and other interface of interaction such as LinkedIn and Flickr. These are the interactive websites, chat rooms, or platforms that permit users to leave comments and have discussions with other people [17]. According to him, there are many characteristics of social media that enables them to be adapted for more than the sharing of social courtesies among friends. These include that social media allows people to:

- Create a profile or identity through which one can show others who one is. □

Create links and lists to things one support and likes.

- Easily share information with and among groups.
- Pass comments and messages from one person that others can read. □

Establish connections to other people.

[18] summarized these characteristics in his own words as; social presence, media richness, autonomy, playfulness, privacy, and personalization. The fact that social media platform is easily accessible, inexpensive, and enhances political participation especially among youths who form majority of its users, does not in any way create room for abuse. Social media helps in shaping political communication by segmenting its audience through diversification of coverage and exposure. By weakening the gate - keeping role in social media, political communications are formed and shaped. Unlike what is obtainable in the traditional media which are usually flooded with press release and government generated information, the social media permits sharing of current breaking news. These in all produce great influence on social economics and political settings while building a network of online relationships. Social media platform offers its users a 24 hours access to information - they can publish and react to any information from anywhere and anytime. Any government who wishes to communicate effectively with its citizens can maximize the power of the social media to enhance their political participation.

[19], argues that Social media facilitates increased access to opinion sharing online, greater demonstration of media selectivity through reposting of materials online and the demonstration

of editorial behaviour through filtering. [6] as cited by [20] categorized social media into the following;

□ Collaborative Projects (e.g. Wikipedia)

□ Blogs and Micro blogs (e.g. Twitter) □

Content Communities (e.g. YouTube)

□ Social Networking (e.g. Facebook)

□ Virtual Game Worlds (e.g. World of War craft)

□ Virtual Social Worlds (e.g. Second life)

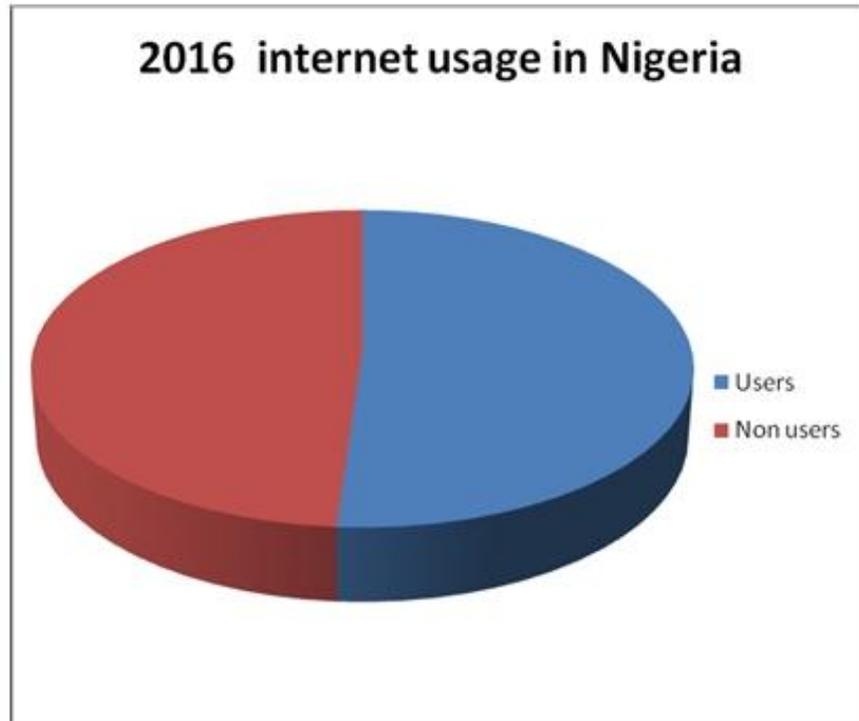
[21] contend that it can be said that social media is a set of web used broadcast technologies that enables the democratization of content, giving people the ability to emerge from consumer of content to publishers. [22], defines social media as website and application word for social networking. Social networking means the use of dedicated website and application to communicate with other users or to find people with similar interest.

According to [23], the term social media refers to the wide range of internet based and mobile services that allow users to participate in online exchange, contribution or join online communities. In the late 1990's as broad internet became more popular, website that allowed users to create and upload content began to surface. The first social network site was (sixdegrees.com) it came on board in 1997. From 2000 onward, a large number of social network sites were launched. By 2002, social media had gained widespread acceptance and some network providers gained huge number of users. For example, in November 2007 facebook announced it had 1 billion users worldwide; while twitter had an estimate of 517 million users.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN NIGERIA (FACTS AND FIGURES)

According to www.internetworldstarts.com retrieved on Saturday 24th September 2016, Nigeria's population as at mid 2016 is put at one hundred and eight one million, five hundred and sixty two thousand, and fifty six (181, 562, 056). Out of this figure, Nigeria had in year 2000, just two hundred thousand internet users, and this rose to ninety two million, six hundred and ninety nine thousand, nine hundred and twenty four (92,699,924) users in 2016. This represents 51.1% of the total population of the country, which is more than half of the total population of Nigeria. Nigeria's internet users represent 28.0% of the total internet users in Africa out of this number, Nigeria has 15,000,000 (fifteen million active facebook users).

According to [24], retrieved on Monday 20th September, 2016, facebook (an online social network sites that allows user to post opinion, comment, and share) as at February 2016, 7.2 million users in Nigeria visits facebook each day, out of this 97% access social media through their mobile devices. According to [24], (an online news publishing blog) as at January 2012, Nigeria had about 1, 646, 212 tweets daily, making it the third largest active twitter user in Africa.



HOW SOCIAL MEDIA PROMOTES POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA:

As it has been aptly captured in the foregoing, it can be deduced that the internet has provided a “society” inside the society wherein we live. Individuals “live” in the internet the same way they live in the society.

This factor has its numerous advantages which includes the following:

- The internet provides a platform through which all individuals irrespective of tribe, religion, sex, educational background, etc can be reached without sentiment or discrimination.
- The internet makes it possible for a large number of audience, scattered all over the country and even beyond to be reached at the same time without geographical limit or boundaries.
- The internet provides a platform for the target audience to be reached at almost zero cost. The huge sum that is usually spent in mobilization is reduced.

These advantages as listed have their significant impact in enhancing political mobilization. It entails therefore that politician, through the normal grassroots level, should endeavour to also take their campaign to the internet world, which exist on its own. The internet provides a larger scale for mobilization and campaign.

Politicians should harness the avalanche platform provided by the internet, especially social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to market their manifesto and also gain support from the populace. This is done by gathering large number of followers on social media platforms and intimating them on planned policies and programmes.

Beyond politicians, individuals that want to pursue a genuine cause can be sure of mobilizing the youths to support that cause through social media. The Arab spring that swept through the Arab countries was mobilized on twitter, facebook, etc. Severally individuals shared videos and pictures that tend to promote the cause they want to pursue and in so doing the support of the public is gotten.

Government can utilize this attribute of the internet to mobilize the support of the public on their planned policies and programmes or even executed programmes. Such support will help quail the tension such politics could cause in the society especially when the intention is not well understood. Religious organisations, NGO's and corporate bodies should maximize the internet in mobilizing followership, support and membership.

OPINION POLL

According to Patterson (1994), public opinion is those opinions held by ordinary citizen which elected officials take into account when they chooses to act or not to act. Every responsible government in participatory democracy has it as a major concern to ensure that majority of the populace is carried along in their overall decision making. From time to time, government seeks the opinion of the populace on whether to go ahead with a planned policy or not. The social media (internet) again provides a very nice platform for measuring the opinion of the populace. Through this medium, issues of public importance can be raised by the government for the masses to air their views. At the end of the polling, comments are counted according to the choice of the populace, usually; the outcome of the poll may be represented in a bar chart or pie chart. Sometimes, it can be measured in percentage. The choice of the social media is informed by the fact that it represent the most efficient, credible and reliable means of conducting the poll. Before the final result of the poll is announced, individuals see the result just as people comment. This process is very transparent and reliable.

Again, it is ideal because people can comment from the comfort of their homes, without coming out to stay under the sun. They can comment from wherever they like. It is also important to add that no heavy funds are spent in conducting these polls. The government spends little or nothing. They don't have to worry over the cost of conducting these polls, since more than half of the people and about 75% of those in age of responsibility (age 18 and above) are already on the internet, social media therefore offers the best machinery for opinion poll. The outcome of the polls is known almost as soon as the poll closes. Collating the votes does not take time as everything is already summed up before the collation ends. This process is free and saves time.

FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Perhaps the most outstanding feature of the social media is the fact that it provides for the citizens the much sort opportunity to express their thoughts, to criticize or praise any government without fear of arrest. This is particularly so in democratic states as Nigeria claim to practice. Politicians/Government Officials that are been misled by praise singers and political sycophants can get to know what people really feel about them and their policies first hand through social media. The fact that most internet accounts do not have genuine address or real names makes it very difficult for the individuals to be dictated. Issues prevailing in our contemporary society suggest that on several occasions, such criticisms have been received by those in question, and in most cases, it ends up influencing their action in favour of the public. People feel free to contribute over the internet, since they know no visible power will come after them. This is particularly healthy for every democracy.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that the role of media in political participation in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasised. As the world moves from what it used to be to a digital world, Nigeria should not be left in the dark. We should rise to use the many dividends of technology to our advantage. As a developing country, the social media can help in cutting down cost of seeking public opinion and to ensure that the will of the masses are translated into policies that will benefit all. Social media offer participatory democracy at its best, the technology that promotes transparency, efficiency and greater accuracy in the political process.

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