NTAtvc J of Comm. Dec., 2020;4(2)

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Social Media as an Agent for Youth in Political Participation of Rural Communities in Nigeria

SESAN ASEKUN-OLARINMOYE, PhD, BENJAMIN KAYODE OGUNDEJI & OLU OYALABU, DMin.

Mass Communication Department Adeleke University, Ede, Osun State, Mass Communication Department Olabisi Onabanjo University Ago-Iwoye, Ogun State.benjaminkayode65@gmail.com, Director of Springtime Development Foundation Adeleke University Ede, Osun State. dblessedc2000@yahoo.com

Abstract

There has been a growing concern over the years that conventional media cannot meet the needs of the rural people during the pre-election and election period. Most political messages are highly paid for making it very difficult for ordinary citizens to participate in the electoral process and necessitating a recourse to alternative media. *This* paper thus focuses on the role of social media as an agent of political participation in rural communities in Nigeria. The study was anchored in *uses* and gratification theory. The research adopted descriptive and analytical methods which are aimed at describing and explaining a given phenomenon. It argues that the citizens, young and old, now have access to phones, which allow them to receive and disseminate messages of various kinds. It stresses that social media have brought tremendous changes in *citizens* 'involvement in the political process, which have both positive and negative dimensions. The paper therefore recommends massive orientation of the citizenry in the rural areas on the benefits of social media for political participation and that the use of the social media be regulated to curb the negative effects.

Keywords: Social media, political participation, rural community

Introduction

Political participation has evolved in recent times with the advent of new technologies. The arrival of social media in particular in the few years has brought a new vista not only in the area of political communication but information sharing in general. Facebook, which the most popular among the social media, allows campaigners to send out mass messages, and post pictures and videos while the Internet with the public twitter is used to send short and targeted messages to thousands of followers and interact with others. Youtube is used to post campaign videos and to post campaign pictures among the youth and others in rural communities.

The advent of these technologies tends to make everyone who can use them a mass communicator. In order words, one can stay right in one's bedroom, sitting room or even in a farmland or a moving vehicle and access information about a particular political party without being there. One can even enjoy entertainment, events and enjoy full interaction with the world just by pressing a button.

Writing on this development, Odoemelam (2011) observes that the new media communication has in no small measure helped communities to be aware of one another. Barah (2009) agrees that as the technology continues to shrink the world, people will become increasingly involved in one another's lives and as people come to know more about others who were hitherto separated from them by distance, they will form new beneficial relationships.

The above statements underscore that the social media is an important ingredient in human communication, especially as it concerns the fostering of relationships and interaction among youth and old. Thus in the world today, individuals, groups, organizations and even nations are taking the advantage of the opportunities provided by social medial and other e-media platforms to mobilize millions of people and the electorate to support and advance their cause. In the political sphere, it has become a veritable tool for mobilizing youth and citizens towards active participation in the political process and democratic projects.

However, before the invention of the social

media, the older or conventional media - radio, television, newspapers, magazines, etc. ruled the world which does not allow for political participation in the electoral process 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 the electoral process.

Conventional media critics such as Graber (1976), Blumber and Qurewhitch (1995) and Fallows (1996), all cited in Abubakar (2011), believe that voters were left with paid political propaganda containing only meaningless slogans, making them disinterested and cynical about the political process. They argue that there is absence of serious debate in the conventional media that could make people learn the substance of issues and policy proposals as well as related arguments, and that this disallows citizens from participating actively in political issues.

The coming of social media in the last few years has however brought tremendous changes in citizens' involvement in the political process. This is because the technology is open, participatory, interactive and cost effective. They belong to the new genre of media 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 (Adibe, 2013).

The ubiquitous access to these online devices has democratizing effects as they offer youth and citizens opportunities for further engagement in the political process. This means that voters have become more than just passive consumers of digital messages; they are now creators of the messages. Kuhus (2011) in Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe (2012, p. 11) observes that:

> The value of communication experience has undergone a sea-change, from the need to share it, to share in it. Technology and social media in particular have brought power back to the people; with it, established authorities are now undermined and users are now the experts. The assumption is that people can now consume media as wanted and needed rather than allowing media producers to schedule consumption time and content. You can now communicate and dialogue with anyone from any place and anytime.

Social media are forms of electronic communication; which facilitate interaction based on certain interests and characterized social media, which include web and mobile based, are used to turn communication into interaction among individuals, communist and organizations.

Kaplan and Haenlenin (2000) define social media as a group of internet base application that allow the creation and exchange of *user*-generated contents. They support the democratization of knowledge and information and transform from content consumers to content producers.

The problem: The last few years have witnessed the use of the social media for political purposes in Nigeria. This is because the technology is participatory, interactive and cost effective and has made the medium of the moment as far as political communication, mobilization and participation are concerned. However, the use of social media technology for political participation in rural community has been a critical concern in Nigeria especially among the youth and the old.

The use of social media in political participation has created 'moral panic in the society especially with the interaction and behavioural pattern of the citizens. A number of studies have addressed the risks of inappropriate contact such as bullying and online contact with strangers. The studies suggest that such contacts may put users at risk of harm either directly or indirectly from the consequences of their online behavior (Hunduja, 2010).

For social networking, the issues of verification and anonymity are problems. A significant proportion of young people communicate with strangers online and post material about themselves, which would be considered private in most circumstances. The ability to restrict access to

sites is known but it is not always easy to restrict them from giving out inappropriate information publicly to anyone. However, some also do so because of internet illiteracy (Livingstone, 2007).

The risk of inappropriate contact (especially in relation to sexual predation), harassment and bullying represents significant and growing policy concerns when considering the regulation of the Internet. Research suggests that young people may be aware of the risk especially regarding social networking sites but the awareness of these issues and problems is not always put into action. There is thus growing evidence that, notwithstanding their many advantages and pleasures, social networking sites permit young people to go with political thuggery and to create profiles that expose the individual, and ridicule or harass others.

Theoretical Perspective

This paper is anchored in the uses and gratification theory. The theory is associated with the works of Ehhu Katz, Jay Blumba and Michael Gurevitch (1974). It belongs to the limited or indirect effects theories of mass communication. The theory according to Anaeto, Onabanjo, and Osifeso (2008) is concerned with what people do with the media instead of what the media do to people. The assumption is that people influence the effects media have on them. It assumes that 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 fulfil specific gratifications. Folarin (1998) notes that the main thrust of the theory is that audience members have certain needs that make them expose 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 contents, make meaning and act that meaning (Akinkunmi, 2011). According to them, one can say that social media users seek messages and select specific ones that suit their purpose, that users are not passive but active audience and that political candidates use social media of their choice and message content during the electoral process when allowed political participation.

Research Method

The paper used descriptive and analytical perspectives. Descriptive studies are aimed at describing or explaining a given phenomenon. Yang (2010) notes that the difference between descriptive and analytic approaches is that while descriptive studies attempt to describe, determine or identify what is, analytical studies try to establish what it is that or how it came to be. Also Wimmer and Dominick (2006) explain that while descriptive research compares and describes what phenomena are, analytical research usually concerns itself with cause - effect relationships and the result usually allows researchers to examine the interrelationship among variables and to develop explanatory inferences. This method is adopted to analyse and address the many questions that have arisen following the emergence of the social media especially as it concerns their use in the political process, and progress and its effects on political participation in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification

At this juncture the key concepts of this study are defined viz: Social media, youth, and rural community and political participation.

Social media: Social media are internet sites where people freely share and discuss information about their lives, using a multimedia mix of personal words, pictures, videos and audio. Using these sites, individuals and groups create and exchange content and engage in person-to-person conversation. Such takes place in many forms such as blogs and microblogs, forums and news, writing communities, digital storytelling, scrapbooking, data, content image and video sharing, podcasts and collective intelligence among others. Some of the well-known sites include facebook, Linkedln, myspace, twitter, flickr, wordpress, blogger, typepad, live, journal, Wikipedia, wet paint, wikidot, second life, delicious, dig, redder, lulu, etc.

Bohler and Charlvonder (2011) refer to web-

basedtools and services that allow users to create, share, rate and search for content and information without having to log into any specific portal site or destination. According to Davies and Cranston (2008), online social networking plays an increasing important role in the lives of many young people, over 60% of 13 - 17 years of age profile on Social Networking Sites (SNS) and many young people are spending upwards of two hours a night on online social networking activities. They further state that Social Network Sites (SNS) like Bebo, facebook and myspace have been a massive growth in young people's online social networking since the emergence of myspace in 2003 and facebook and Bebo in 2005. However, these sites are likely the beginning of online social networking trends, which will continue to reshape much of young people's local and global communication with significant real-world consequences both positive and negative.

The advent of social media had brought about a change in our cultural norms because they connect people instantly from distant lands and serve as a platform to establish new relationships among youths. It also enables coordination of common goals and ideals through powerful initiatives. Since their adoption, social media have been integrated into the daily lives of an increasing number of young people. Thus, scholars and commentators are debating the impact of these new media on the activities, social relationships and world views of the younger generation (Mesch, 2010).

Political participation: Before the advent of the new media, political campaigns and other participatory activities blossomed in the traditional media. Olajide (2002) cited in Onwukwe notes that prior to this period political rallies, personal contacts and speeches were popularly used for mobilizing the electorate's support on political issues and that this was greatly propelled by the force of the mass media. At that time, political participation was more risky, and expensive and required a great deal of investments from individuals willing to engage in political activities and participation.

Chatora (2012) defined political participation as citizens' involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives. It refers to the various mechanism through which members of the public express their political views and, or exercise their influence on the political process. However, Abubakar (2011) sees it as the involvement of people, (not necessarily active) in any political process before a collective decision is arrived. So, political participation entails citizens' engagement in issues, which serve as a yardstick for choosing would-be leaders. It may also include assessing the capabilities of the incumbents and advocating ways of ameliorating societal ills for a more prosperous country.

Kweon and Kim (2011) as cited in Abubakar (2011) maintain that social media have become a main source of personal orientation, anonymous interactivities and social community on a variety of issues that involve politics and political discourse. Mayfield (2010) and Bradley (2009) attribute the social media capacity of boosting participation to its connectedness and textual/audio-visual appeal. Convincingly, the facebook, twitter, youtube, 2go, gsm-sms/calls blackberries services, etc. have made political participation much easier, faster and cost effective.

Characteristics of political participation are:

Participation is a right, not something handed out by the state.

Participation must be long-term and not expert driven.

Participation is about 'voice' and self – representation.

Participation is both institutional and non - institutional.

Participation means broadening the culture of representation.

Participation becomes information sharing, where communities become informed about the decision.

Participation may be through consultation, where communities influence decisions.

Public participation is collaboration, with joint

decision-making.

Participation is on empowerment and self-determination.

From the above, political participation revolves around citizens' involvement.

Various uses of social media for political participation by the youth in Nigeria: Few selected cases:

In Nigeria, the case of President Goodluck Jonathan quickly comes to mind. Jonathan had on Wednesday, Sept. 15, 2010 announced his bid for the highest political office in the land on facebook. He informed his 217,000 fans on the world's most popular networking platform of his intention. Twenty-four hours later, 4,000 more fans joined his page. By the day of election, on 16th April, 2011, he had over half a million followers(Adibe & Odomelam 2011).In addition to the approximately three 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 the police.

Organizations such as "enough is enough" Nigeria, "Reclaim Naija," "Wangonet" and Lamlagos" established platforms enabling citizens to report election-incidences with pictures, videos, text messages and voicemail and traditional media houses such as Channels Television 234 next and *Punch* Newspapers used new media to disseminate information and gather feedback from viewers.

Adibe and Odomelam (2011) further observe that during the elections in Nigeria, many Nigerians were armed with their blackberries and twitter feeds. One of such Nigerians was Gbenga, a 33 year old IT consultant and an activist who ILO designed a smart phone application called Revoda which allowed voters to instantly upload photos, pictures and reports of delayed arrival of voting materials and presence of intimidating gangs at their local polling stations to their database. Then, a daily summary was sent to Nigerian election officials and Western observers as well as posted on the Revoda Website, Twitter and Facebook pages. This allowed many people within and outside Nigeria to follow the process.

There was another group "Reclaim Naija" which used text messages and e-mail reports to compile a live online map of trouble spots. There were also "twitter activito" whose job was to look out for rigging and spread warning about bombings at polling stations. Omenugha (2011, P.5) observes that this massive use of social media contributed immensely to the success of the election acclaimed the freest and fairest in the history of the country. However, this disagree with the observations of Adeyanju and Haruna (2011) that the technology did the nation greater harm than good as it provided avenue to disseminate dysfunctional messages that culminated in the post-election violence and tensions witnessed in many parts of the country, particularly in the north.

The issue of January, 2012 protests over the removal of fuel subsidy is another vivid example. The protest witnessed a massive use of facebook, twitter, blackberries, 2go, youtube, etc. for public discourse. In Lagos, Kaduna and Kano where the protests took roots and later went violent, citizens used the social media platform to capture and report cases of police brutalities and cases of manhandling of citizens. Cellphone sms and calls, facebook and other social platforms were used to mobilize crowds for protests at the Ojota Gani Fawehinmi Square (a scenario very similar to that of the 'Tahrir Square in Egypt during the uprising), pictures and videos of intimidating crowd were then uploaded to facebook, youtube and twitter for the world to see and to spur Nigerians in other cities to follow suit. The facebook pages of President Goodluck Jonathan equally received thousands of messages of condemnation on a daily basis during the few days that the protests lasted, with some calling for his resignation.

The issue of concern here is that the social media technology has been widely used to arrange, support and fuel violent protests in many parts of Africa in the first few years of its existence on the continent. An example is that of Zambia's elections in 2011, and Egypt Jan. 25, 2011 (Mubarak's 30 year

rule), Arab Spring in North Africa (Tunisia), etc.

Adeyanju and Haruna (2011) write that during the 2011 electioneering period in Nigeria - facebook and GSM-SMS were widely used to disseminate provocative and inciting messages that eventually culminated in the most unfortunate violence that followed the announcement of the election results in some states of the North with some calling on non-indigenes to leave. The above shows the extent to which social media could be used. On the same note Valenzuela, Arriagada and Scherman (2012,p. 302) capture the functions and uses of social media network thus: 'Social network sites have several affordances for promoting, participation, particularly protest behavior among youth". They facilitate access to a large number of contacts thereby enabling social movements to reach critical mass (Marwell & Oliver, 1993). By allowing multiple channels for interpersonal feedback peer acceptable and reinforcement of group norms, these sites also promote the construction of personal and group identities that are key antecedents of protest behavior.

According to Dalton et al.(2009),social network sites function as information hubs that allow users to remain in contact and exchange updates regarding their activities with others that share their interest. One can go on and on to state the numerous uses of social media networks in political participation in Nigeria. The fact remains that it will continue to be reckoned in years to come.

Conclusion

The paper examines social media as an agent for youth in political participation in Nigeria. It has shown that the use of social media is becoming the norm in Nigeria politics especially in political campaign, awareness and electoral rights of the citizenry. Also, the social media has opened the eyes of the youth, the old and the young in mobilizing the electorate towards the political development of Nigeria. It has also been discovered that the use of social media can cause political unrest and thuggery among the youth. There are also issues that border on anonymity of sources which affects the citizen.

Recommendations

With the rapid growth of the social media and the change in political development of Nigeria, the following suggestions are offered.

1. Massive orientation and education of both young and old, especially the rural people on how to use the social media, should be embarked on.
2. Citizen should be encouraged on the proper use of social media during electioneering campaign.
3. Anonymity of sources makes it difficult for strict regulation and monitoring especially on the type of information, messages, pictures and videos sent on various media which also allow fraudulent practices among politicians and the electorate. Government should therefore enact the law that will regulate the use of social media.

References

Abubakar, A.A. (2011). *Political participation and discourse in social media during the 2011 presidential electioneering*. Paper presented at the ACCE conference held in Covenant University, Ota from September, 19-23, 2011.

Adeyanju & Haruna (2011). *Uses of SMS in campaigns: an assessment of the 2011 general elections and post elections violence in Northern Nigeria*. Paper presented at the ACCE conference, held in Covenant University, Ota from Sept., 19-23,

2011.Adibe, K.N.,& Odomelam (2011). *Political conflicts and political communication in Africa: an analysis of social media role*. Paper presented at the ACCE conference, held in Covenant University, Otafrom September 19 - 23, 2011.

Adibe, K.N. (2013). *Social media and political participation during the 2011 general elections in Southern East Nigeria*: *The lapses and the lessons*. Doctoral Seminar, UNN, Nigeria.

Akinwumi, A.O. (2011). *New media, political campaign and violence in Nigeria*. Paper presented at the ACCE conference, held in Covenant University, Ota from 19 -23,2011.

Anaeto, S.G., Onabanjo, O.S.,& Osifeso, J.B.

(2008). *Models and theories of communication.* Maryland: African Renaissance Books Incorporated.

Baran, S. (2009). *Introduction to mass communication.* London: Mayfield Publishing Company.

Bohler, M.,& Charvander, M. (2011). The potential of social media to influence socio-political change on the African continent. South Africa: briefing No. 46.

Chatora, A. (2012). Encouraging political participation in Africa: The potentials of social media platforms in encouraging political participation in Africa. Retrieved on 26/10/2012/ from Googlesearch/http.www. roleofsocialmedia

Davies, T., & Cranston, P. (2008). Youth work and social networking final research report: practical participation, Retrieved on Oct., 20, 2012 from http:/blog.practical participation. co.uk wp-content/uploads/2009/08 full youth work and social-networking-final-report, pdf.

Folarin, B. (1998). *Theories of mass communication: an introductory text*. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers Nig. Ltd.

Handy, N.,& Gomaa, H.E. (2012). Framing the Egyptians uprising in Arabic.

Hunduja, S. (2010). Building, cyber-bulling and suicide. *Arch Suicide Res., 14*(3),266-221.

Livingstone, S. (2007). The challenges of engaging youth online contrasting producers and teenagers interpretations of websites. *European Journal of Communication,* 22 (2), 165 - 184.

Lim, M. (2012). Clicks, cabs, and coffee houses: social media and oppositional movements in Egypt, 2004 - 2011. *Journal of Communication,* 62 (2), 231 - 248.

Mesh, G.S. (2010). The Internet and youth culture. Retrieved on September 15,2012 from vvww.iascculture.orglTHR achieves/youth culture mesch pdf.

Valenzuela, S., Arriagada, A.,& Scherman, A. (2012). The social media basis of youth protest behaviour: The case of Chile. *Journal of Communication,* 62 (2), 299 - 314.

Wimmer & Dominick (2006). *Mass media research: An introduction.* California, Thompson Wadsworth.