ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Digital Media as the Nexus in Redefining Political Engagement in Nigeria

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Abstract

Digital technology is a western innovation which the so called third world countries have keyed into, digested and adopted all of its tenets in totality. Digital media are now completely integrated in the ordinary life of millions of people around the continent. The world is viewed as a community in which distance and isolation have been dramatically reduced by electronic and digital media. Globalization has yet to translate into political and economic development in Sub-Saharan Africa. The yearnings and expectations of the people have been bedeviled by bad governance which in most cases favours the rich and neglects to take into account the plight of the poor who make up the bulk of the electorate. This has significantly reduced political participation as its dividends are in the hands of a privileged few. This paper adopts technological determinism theory. In this instance, digital media can increase political engagements by redefining and changing the political perception of the people. Also, digital media/platform should be more proactive towards teaching the gains of political participation instead of engaging more in advertorials and publicity which is most often seen as a shame owing to past experience. Until this is achieved, political engagement in the digital media as global form in the Nigerian milieu will only record marginal success owing to political apathy.

Keywords: Digital media, global Platform, Political Engagement, Apathy.

Introduction

Political engagement is best described as the political activism of citizenry towards politics. It can also be described as a cognitive process, the connecting of thoughts, recognizing the new information as important and relevant, a process that leads to having an attitudinal reaction. Political engagement is a necessary precursor for political participation and thus important for a vibrant civic culture.

In Nigeria, no one ever envisaged a reduction in the towering roles of the traditional mass media. The development of digital media as a tool for simultaneous connection among people globally has given way for new means of mobilizing citizens towards a particular cause even politically. The digital media has been a major force in technology. Its impacts and use have exceeded the conventional purpose to the unimaginable future. Digital media are forms of communication that facilitate the production, dissemination, and exchange of political content on platforms and within networks that accommodates interaction and collaboration. This has evolved rapidly over the past three decades some unanticipated ways in redefining the political engagement in Nigerian politics.

Being a digitalized tool, the social media was found to give platform for individuals to air their opinion concerning a candidate, a party and a policy. The conventional media which comprises the print and electronic media in Nigeria especially the privately owned ones have always been strong instruments of political engagement, sensitization and mobilization of people towards democracy. However, their reach was limited by such factors as government intimidation and harassments, limited resources, logistics and the elitist ownership and control. Hence, with the widening of communication media space through improved technology, information dissemination and political engagement of the public now have a wide spread immediacy and more diligent follow up of events. This is as a result of their easy accessibility and availability irrespective of social status.

Statement of Problem

The traditional media of mass communication are found to give less room for political engagement. As such the message from these media have been found to create the immediate impact. Therefore, dependence on these traditional forms of communication hinders political participation by a greater number of the citizenry and thus, affected political engagement and development.

However, the digital media and its component forms has ignited the communication process by the active participation of the citizenry in the political communication. In spite of the gains of the digital media over the political activists, political parties, government, institutions and agencies are yet to tap into it as nexus in redefining political engagement in Nigeria.

Political Engagement and Political Communication

In the Nigerian context, political engagement is obtainable in different forms, including joining civic/political groups, having a face-to-face meeting, contributing money to a candidate or political group, working or volunteering for a campaign, interacting with politicians, attending a campaign event or contacting government officials by phone or writing letter, signing petition online, voting, making political contribution on social media, participating in protest, fundraising, and deliberating with political figures, institutions and organizations.

The measure of political engagement and participation are important components and foundations of successful democracy. However the adoption of digital media into the political game has brought about a convergence in usage and preference of traditional print and electronic media to digital means.

Implications to Democratic Governance

The convergence has wide-ranging implications for democratic governance and political practices. It has radically altered the ways in which government institutions operate and political leaders communicate. It has transformed the political media system and redefined the role of journalists. It has redefined the ways elections are contested, and how citizens engage in politics.

Fundamentally, the media exists as an organ of information sourcing and dissemination, social enlightenment, mobilization and engagement. These functions set the media apart as an important factor in the relationship between the government and the governed thereby making the digital media an indispensable tool for good governance, societal growth, development and political engagement.

Ideally, the digital media serve several essential roles in a democratic society. Their primary purpose is to inform the public, providing citizens with the information needed to make thoughtful decisions about leadership and policy. These forms of media act as watchdogs checking government actions. They set the agenda for public discussion of issues, and provide a forum for political expression. They also facilitate community building by helping people to find common causes, identify civic groups, and work towards solutions to societal problems.

The digital media platform provides a network of people interconnected with political problems, to share and discuss their opinions. The relationship between the conventional media and digital media is symbiotic. The conventional media have incorporated digital media into their reporting strategies. They distribute materials across an array of old and new communication platforms. They rely on digital media sources to meet the ever increasing demand for content. Despite competition from the digitalized media, the audiences for conventional media remain robust, even if they are not as formidable as in the past. Consequently, the digital media rely on their conventional counterparts to gain legitimacy and popularize their content.

Previous Forms of Political Engagements in Nigeria

Political stability and development of any political system is a function of the awareness and positive involvement of the citizens in civic and political matters. This is why Appadorac (2004) posits that

democracy demands from the common man a certain level of ability and character: rationale conduct and active participation in the government.

In a political system, the citizens can be involved in the political progress and decision making by joining a political party or being friends of the party and engaging in acts that endorse the organization (Liking and share, for example).

Prior to the advent of technological era, there have been different forms of political engagement in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored in Democratic Participant Media Theory and Technological Determinism Theory.

Democratic Participant Media Theory

The theory allows for multiplicity of ideas as well as a democratic participation by citizens in a society.

Democratic participant media theory is an advocate of democratization of communication. It grew as a reaction against other theories and actual experiences and as a positive move towards new forms of media institutions (MC Quail, 2005). For people often neglected by the media, this theory affords them an opportunity to actively interact by engaging in political, economic, social and cultural debates for development purposes.

The Technological Determinism Theory

The technological determinism theory better explains the issue of discourse in the work in that the advent of digital media platforms has democratized access to information and enhanced freedom and opportunities for political engagements. The ability to use digital media to redefine political engagement has brought a change in our political democratic processes.

The relevance of this theory to the study is that technological determinism which led to the emergence of digital media and/or social media platforms has redefined the Nigerian political system to some extent. Nigerians now use digital media platforms to do campaigns and also use card reader to ascertain the number of people that voted in a given election in a polity.

Methodology

Elections and electioneering process is not alien to Nigeria and Nigerians. Nigeria has experienced years of political crises and reforms to accommodate its plurality and diversity in culture and language. Ethnocentrism has been the bane of the Nigerian Political Landscape which has played a pivotal role towards shaping its forms.

This study adopts the content analysis methodology to X-ray the Nigerian political landscape and its forms as well as examine the influence of digital media era towards redefining the political engagement in Nigeria using an in-depth assessment of existing literature to further the horizon of this discourse.

Political Engagement before Digital Media in Nigeria

Campaigns

Campaigns are organized efforts targeted at getting the support of the citizens, achieving electoral victories and controlling the institutions of government. According to Idiong (2008), politicians are great believers in campaigns.

Almost all of them figure that a good campaign is the key to victory. Through campaigns politicians communicate their aspirations, policies, attributes, views, etc. to potential voters and citizens who equally need these pieces of information to ascertain if the political decisions, actions and voting campaigns, whether staged or spontaneous, are just for show. They perform a valuable function in a democracy.

Some of the previous forms of political engagement strategies are: Radio/TV advertorials, posters and banners, billboards, T-Shirts, face-caps, openers, rallies, distribution of money and food items among others.

Radio/TV advertorials

This is one of the major forms of political engagement in Nigeria. Before the commencement

of election, series of advertisements are placed on either the radio or television. Both media are channels through which political parties and their aspirants create awareness and deliver their party manifestoes.

Posters and banners

Other forms of political engagement in Nigeria are posters and banners. These are printed messages on sheets of paper and clothes which contain information about the party and political aspirants. Politicians in Nigeria also make use of billboards. Billboards are also forms of political engagement through which information about electoral matters is disseminated to the public.

T-shirts, face-caps, openers, etc. are forms of political engagements in Nigeria. Members of various parties are engaged in sharing and distributing the above items from aspirants via different party agents by way of inducing the citizens to vote for them. Rallies are forms of political engagement in Nigeria. These are meetings organized and held by members of different political parties in order to promote the cause of the party.

Distribution of money and food items

These are other forms of political engagement in Nigeria. There have been considerable cases in past elections where aspirants use money and food items to induce voters. Politicians fondly use money and other items to manipulate the electorate.

Deficiencies of previous forms of Political engagement in Nigeria

In Nigeria political activities and transition programmes have been marked with turbulence, uncertainties and violence. Right from the first republic, the Nigerian politics is characterized by greed. Love of power has become synonymous with Nigeria's political culture such that virtually all elections held so far in the country are violence-ridden (Ojo, 2014). The previous forms of political engagement in Nigeria have some identifiable deficiencies/flaws. These include:

Commercialization or Monetization of Votes:

This is one of the identifiable deficiency of the previous forms of political engagement in Nigeria. Nigerian politics is highly commercialized. Since the first republic, there have been eases of the use of money to buy voting cards or even the conscience of voters. Politicians are habitually ready use money to manipulate victories.

Mode of Electoral Campaigns and Rigging

It has been observed that electoral campaigns in Nigeria are a do-or-die affair which features abusive language and blackmail. Parties do not see themselves as opponents or rivals, but as arch enemies. Perceiving Nigerian competitive election as a zero sum game, each political party recruits and maintains desperate unemployed youths, criminals and destitute and uses them as thugs to intimidate and harass opponents and even audiences at rally grounds.

Lack of National-based Campaigns

The other limiting factor to broad-based participation in politics is the lack of national-based campaigns. Extreme sessionalism is a serious constraint. As the experiences of the 1965, 1979, and 1983 General Election show, party campaigns are limited mainly to the immediate cultural milieu of contestants, with evidence of strong ethnic or tribal backing. In the 1965 General Election, Northern people's Congress (NPC) dominated the Northern Region in Electioneering campaigns. Its political opponents were warned in their own interest to concentrate electioneering campaigns in the geo-political ethnic areas. In the Western Region, the Action Group (AG) tried hard to prevent the influence of N.P.C and National Council of Nigeria and Nigeria Citizens (N.C.N.C) in predominately Yoruba territory. The lawless state in the Western Region election in 1965 which resulted in the eventual failure of the first republic was logically an outcome of the AG protest against the penetration of the West by N.C.N.C and to

some extent N.P.C. In the East, N.C.N.C dominated political activities with the dorminant support of the Ibo ethic group. The picture was not different in the 1979 and 1983 general elections. Hence, there was great problem of mobilizing the individuals to believe in the nation and not the tribe, and to participate freely, without danger to life and property, in electioneering activities outside ethnic confines. These led to political apathy occasioned by sessionalism.

Incumbency Factor

The greatest setback of opposition parties in Nigeria is mapping out a viable campaign strategy against the ruling party who determines the whims and caprices of the state resources. The ruling party usurp virtually all the campaign structure using security operatives to annihilate the efforts of the opposition thereby forcing it to have a symbolic political engagement strategy.

Bad Roads

The problem of bad roads is a factor associated with the previous forms of political engagement in Nigeria. Owing to the bad road network in almost all the parts of Nigeria movement of people is restricted. Campaign teams find it difficult to penetrate and/or access some areas during campaign periods. This has caused a lot of people to be disfranchised.

Language limitation (Verbosity)

Posters, banners, billboards, manifestoes, etc. are hard to be interpreted by unenlightened people because of the language used in either campaigning and in printing them.

Political Engagement and Digital Media in Nigeria

The emergence of digitalized media is a major phenomenon that has transformed the interaction, communication and sharing of information between people throughout the world. In it is the integration of technology, telecommunications and social interactions, and the construction of words, pictures, videos and audio. This interaction and the manner in which information is presented depend on the varied perspectives and 'building' of shared meaning among communities, as people share their stories and experiences. The conventional media cannot but must coexist with digital media that are the outgrowth of technological innovation that offers a robust platform for political engagement.

Even with the cheapest mobile phones one can still access some social media platforms at reasonable cost for information, education and entertainment. Some of the popular and widely used digitalized media networking sites include websites, blogs, video –sharing platforms, digital apps and social media such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Myspace, Linkedln, Twitter, Youtube among others are continually expanding in innovative ways. Its usage can relay information directly to individuals without the intervention of editorial or institutional gatekeepers, which are intrinsic to conventional forms. Thus, digital media have introduced an increased level of instability and unpredictability into the political communication process and engagement.

The internet-based communication has gained its importance in Nigeria, providing exciting new opportunities for one-on-one as well as on-to-many communications to a fixed connection to take part in the global conversation, a nexus in redefining the country's political engagement. It is believed based on the ubiquity of the digital media in this age that the use of digital media could lead to a more democratic functioninig of the society towards political engagements. There is a daily increase in the use of social media and mobile devices for obtaining political information, creating user generated political content, and expressing political views and opinions. As opined by Wael Ghonim, a Google executive, if you want to liberate a society, just gives them the Internet. He believes that it is the social media that drives real change in the society. However, the interactivity nature of the digital media tools such as Facebook and Twitter allows and creates the process of interdependence among the users. As such, interactivity may likely contribute to a large political engagement and

participation attitude towards politics.

Apparently, because of the heavy usage and technological advantage of the digital media forms which provide unprecedented access to information, and can reach even disinterested audience members through personalized, peer-to-peer channels like Facebook to bridge the online/offline connections through interactivity and fostering political campaign and engagement, politicians in Nigeria are now using it to post their profiles, share political information and also directly interact with their supporters.

The use of digitalized media in politics has continued to grow in many parts of Africa including Nigeria. The 2015 and 2019 general elections marked a significant milestone in the use of digitalized network of social media for political communication in Nigeria, motivated by the former President Barrack Obama's successful use of Facebook to win the United States elections as the first black president. One would recall that Hilary Clinton, a visible opponent to President Obama, first made known her intents to contest for the presidential position through the Youtube while the incumbent president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, uses the Twitter and tweets more than he talks to the traditional print and electronic media. In fact, in the Cable News Network (CNN), reference is often made to most of the messages from President Donald Trump's twitter handle. The digitalized media have become the nation talking to itself like the foremost mass media.

The case is not different in our country. The former Nigerian Senate President, Dr. Bukola Saraki, broke the news of his defection from the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) to the People's Democratic Party (PDP) first on twitter before a statement was released to that effect to the traditional media organizations. Also, social media was used as a platform for political campaign organizations, electioneering crusades, ideological trumpeting exercises, and mobilization of voters. In the collation of results, citizen journalists and civil societies used social media to inform the public as regards the results in several states across the country. This validated the digital media role as watchdog and a reportage route for political processes in Nigeria, thereby adding value to the political culture.

Therefore, the role played by the digital media in the Nigerian 2019 elections is inevitable because it was employed to shape the opinions of many youths, increasing their political awareness and consciousness, which in turn resulted in an unbelievable presidential win of the opposition party (APC) over the ruling party (PDP). It also became a potent tool and even a more lethal weapon and this resulted in releases in the form of videos, voice notes, headlines, as well as broadcasts that made or marred many political parties and individuals. In addition, deliberate distortions in the information about opponents, abusive speech, distortion of the facts about personal performances, and misinformation as a strategy for influencing the electorate were also achieved through the social media.

Nigerian politicians are indeed gradually taking their campaigns to the social networking sites and other online platforms. This was the case during the 2019 election period, as Facebook, Whatsapp and Twitter were all used for informational, educational purposes and participatory commitments. These tools were mostly used to discuss political issues with friends and family oriented members, support political candidates and share attributes of political candidate online, to support, mobilize and monitor activities in government and among parliamentarians as well as to persuade people to register and vote. Political aspirants were disposing of all means to gear up their support base, an avenue to politically promote themselves as candidates, articulate their platforms in details and interact with voters in fundamentally different means, in realization that electioneering requires more than just handshakes and physical persuasion.

Conclusion

The digitalized media became a general assembly

cutting across age boundaries and barrier where opinions are shaped with enabling space for encouraging debates with the intent to mobilize all into politically getting engaged as far as electoral matters are concerned. This demonstrates its level of acceptability in the Nigerian political participation and engagement.

It is also important to note, having seen the momentum and popularity of the digital media in the Nigerian political space, that it is important to guide it against misuse and abuse. Care must be taken to ensure that it must not be used to spread fake news, promote bigotry, crimes and hate speeches as well as nepotistic tendencies.

Recommendation

It is imperative to state that political engagement of late is largely dependent on the use of the digital media, because there is a populace of stronger reliance on its platform as robust mechanism for social transformation and securing political information needed to make an informed political decision. Hence, packaging and delivery of political messages online through the digital media to motivate and develop interest in politics should be an important factor in future campaign strategies.

It can be assumed that the Nigerian society will continue to rely on the digital media forms of social and political interaction as nexus in order to make political commitments and engagements in Nigeria. The digital media should be utilized for projecting the wellbeing of Nigeria, as nexus to encourage and motivate political participation and engagement.

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