



SOCIAL MEDIA AS JOINT ARENA OF VOTERS AND POLITICIANS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Today, the social media space has virtually captured all aspects of human activities. It is a medium of communication that is vibrant, vital and active; giving room for “on the spot” information. It has become a potent weapon for both consumers and developers of contents, and is easily accessible to all and sundry, given the high level innovations in the telecommunication industry across the globe. Within the political space, it has gained ascendancy to various issues and has served as a platform for robust debates and interactions. At the same time, it is a tool of manipulation for both the political elite and the preliterate. The flexible nature of the social media places it within a social space, a tool that can be used negatively or positively based on prevailing interest of all parties herein involved. As far as the political arena is concerned, it brings together politicians and voters into constant interactions. In view of this, this article aimed at examining the social media as a joint arena for voters and politicians in Nigeria with a view to portraying the working parameters and tools of engagement. This paper deployed critical analysis of interactions between voters and politicians using Mediamorphosis as a theoretical framework. The findings of this paper shows that social media serve as interactive platform for both parties. The paper recommends that this culture should be made more transparent and free to engender political accountability and stability.

Keywords: Social Media, Joint Arena, Voters, Mediamorphosis, Politicians, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between voters and politicians cannot be easily jettisoned or swept under the carpet in political discourse. As a matter of fact, they co-exist and are meant to operate a symbiotic relation. That is to say, politicians must satisfy voters in order to win elections or get re-election. In a democratic government, voters play important roles in ensuring successful transition of government. Also, politicians have important roles to play to convince voters to usher them into elective offices (Black, 2005). Before the advent of social media, the relationship between voters and politicians assumed the status of conventional media space and thus, personal or group interactions was to a large extent limited (Wilson, 1991). This was however, cumbersome and financially demanding because politicians must deploy all conventional media to reach out to prospective voters. In other words, it was absolutely difficult for politicians to have easy access to voters and gaining direct feedback became tasking.

Presently, that barrier has been removed to a large extent. The politician can now interact with prospective voters (proliferates) directly without the barrier of space, time and resources (Tankuakio, 2002). The meeting point between them is the social media space. However, scholars

have engaged in several researches surrounding social media and political campaigns, politics and the social media, etc. but scanty literature exists with attempts to interrogate social media as a joint arena for interactions between voters and politicians. It is in view of this that this paper examines social media as joint arena for political interaction between voters and politicians in Nigeria. This paper deploys critical analysis Mediamorphosis as theoretical framework.

Conceptual Clarification

Social Media

Social media is no longer new to people in this present age. What many do not understand is perhaps that it has come to touch on every aspect of human existence. It is about the most used media platforms in the world today and has the capacity to bring about crucial and gargantuan changes in society (Domnick, 2002.). Even at the fact that many people use various social media platforms, some may be unsure of its definition and conceptualisation. In view of this, several scholars have offered various meanings to social media. Alex-Brown's (2011) explanation seems apt for this paper. He explains that social media are platforms

that enable users all over the world to create and share various contents, and participate in several trendy discourses within platforms. His explanations highlights contents and activities. He emphasised that contents include: pictures, text messages, chats, and other materials that users generate. Users can upload and download several of this materials and store them for further use or reference. These are some of the attributes that make social media platform unique and different from conventional media.

It is noteworthy to state that interactivity is another attribute of the social media that makes it an arena whereby contributors intersperse without fear or favour. Interactivity means that any user can send a message, discuss topical issues with other members or users of that group at any time and get response from users (Uwakwe, 2010).

With social media, one can send emails, check the stock market, access news, political development, trends, shopping and connect with people all over the globe (Rahmiati, 2012). The social media platforms include: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube and TikTok. Others include: LinkedIn, WhatsApp, Telegram, Skype, Viber, LINE, WeChat, VKontakte (VK), Badoo, and Myspace.

The characteristics of the social media is amazingly different from the traditional media space, which has been in existence and has become what scholars refer to as “conventional media”. Conventional in the sense that its praxis is familiar and known to many, for a good number of years. As some people would say, it has been tested and trusted for decades (Domnick, 2002). It could be analysed using definite theories and conventions. This discourse tends to buttress the point that social media is still new and undergoing several studies and it falls under what many have termed “new media”. The new media space is perhaps unfamiliar and erratic in nature, but even at that, it has engineered so many development and changes in the media space. Thus, it cannot be over-looked. It has also given media and communication experts a new task (Nwodu & Nwammuo, 2006).

Joint Arena

Joint arena in this context is a coinage that seeks to paint a picture of the media space that is overtly and covertly shared by many without any room for exclusion. It is free to anyone who has access to it at any given time or space. In a political setting, it is considered as a platform for voters and politicians. This dichotomy is in no measure favourable to any particular segment but gives free expressions to all.

Although, it validly supports development for the enthronement of democratic ideals, at the same time, it tends to offer its own disadvantages and side effects.

Voters

Voters are important ingredients to political decisions, especially in a democratic government. They decide who occupies an elective office usually through elections. This is one of the major reasons why they are seen as crucial and relevant. Without them, it becomes increasingly difficult for political office holders to ascend. They also checkmate political processes and politicians. They also evaluate and analyse activities of politicians in line with political promises, party tenets and development indices. The essence of all these checks and balances is to ensure that there is credibility and accountability of government and all its institutions

Politicians

The word politician has been used severally and it means so many things to so many people. For many, a politician is a person active in party politics, or a person holding or seeking an elective office in government. The job of a politician, whether seeking or already holding political office is crucial and important to the development of a nation. To mention a few: they propose, support, reject and create laws that governs

the land and people within that locality. Politicians can be grouped into local and national, depending on classifications within a given government and country. At the local level you have ward chairpersons, local government chairperson, etc., and they are to function within their constituency and contribute to the development of that local area. That is to say, their jurisdiction is not outside their area of coverage. At the national level, they include: governors, national assembly members and other elected officials overseeing activities at the national level. One major issue that preoccupies the discourse of politicians is corruption and this has been seen as a major setback for democracy.

The Political Terrain in Nigeria

The Nigerian political environment is rather robust and sign posts a new era of political history ridden by dictatorship. With several years of military dictatorship, it was imperative that democracy be adopted to create room for people's participation and inclusion in the development of the nation. In the past two decades, the emergence of democracy turned around the entire political landscape of Nigeria. However, the transformation of the political system to democracy still witnessed a mingling or continuation of military leaders who removed their Kaki

and put on civilian dresses. But the ideology of the military still remained to a large extent. This however, played out in the nature of democracy in Nigeria which does not give room to actual participation of the electorates. The later became instrumental for taking over power but with little room to influence decisions as regards development issues in the country.

Mediamorphosis

Mediamorphosis refers to the “transformation of communication media, as a result of the complex interplay of social and technological innovations, perceived needs and competitive and political pressures,” (Tankuakio, 2002.p.5). This term was coined by Fiddler in 1990 because the changing global media environment is signified by the coexistence and co-evolution of media forms, gradual metamorphosis of new media forms from old ones and the challenges brought about by the adoption of new media. Digital media are related and connected to old media. “Mediamorphosis”, encourages us to “examine all forms of communication media as members of an interdependent system, and to note the similarities and relationships that exist among past, present and emerging forms” (Biagi, 2003. p.42). The digital media that are emerging will be similar to the old media, yet different in

ways that will make them distinct from their predecessors, thereby popularising media convergence.

In this regard, the most popular examples of media convergence are: smartphones (converging camera, music, the internet, books, and all other media together), online radio (converging radio with the Internet), e-books (converging paperbacks with the digital technology), and news websites and apps (Fiddler, 1997). Mediamorphosis helps media researchers to better understand the field because of the important role the media plays in creating and propagating shared symbols. Because of the media's power, it can construct symbols on its own. Mediamorphosis lay claims to media convergence and the meaning is situated in the idea that there is technological merging of content in different mass media, such as songs being available on cell phones and similar examples. Mediamorphosis brings about a collapsing of traditional media form into new media, which brings about new behaviour and usage (Tankuakio, 2002).

Intersection between Voters and Politicians in Nigeria with Social Media as the Arena

The social media having dominated the social space brought about a convergence

between voters and politicians. This showed in several daily activities. For instance political campaigns, which is a major activities that brings both parties together for interactions. Social media fits the present period whereby high political activities have been recorded. The year 2023 is slated for the presidential election and other elective offices such as Governorship, federal and state Houses of Assembly House of Representatives, Senatorial elections, etc. In view of this, year 2022 is a run up year to the 2023 and politicians post campaign fliers, pictures on social media to show their intentions, declaration and offices they are vying for. The reality of social media is its ability to spread vital information or post to several other users in hundreds of millions. It is effective, impactful, fast and reliable. With the social media, such election materials and messages could be downloaded and saved for further references as against some of the conventional media channels such as television, radio, billboards and newspaper. With sensitive materials and the possibility of posting, the social media is sensitive and daisy, this is because, information could be used for both positive and negative purposes. In order words, social media can be used to build or mar individuals and groups. Politicians and voters are aware of this possibilities and have used it in their favour.

Another very vital aspect of the social media is that it serves as a platform for opinion seeking about several issues. One example of social media platforms is Twitter which is heavily populated and highly interactive in nature. The nature of Twitter is such that users react actively on issues twitted. From such engagements, politicians and political parties can make a summary of opinions and perception of millions of users with ease without extensive research in the era where conventional media held swear.

In the same vein, discussion is a major activity of the social media which cannot be excluded from this paper. The tenets of communication is basically to send a message through a channel to a receiver and to get feedback as spontaneous as possible. Social media platforms provide instantaneous feedback mechanism in this direction. For instance, the recent discuss on the issue of wife battery and domestic violence became ubiquitous because many users brought it to several social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.

In addition, social media can serve the purpose of data gathering. It is a known phenomenon to have survey carried out on Twitter and Facebook to determine the state of mind of users. This is done by creating a page whereby users vote on a particular

issue. During presidential campaigns, we find presidential survey to test the popularity of candidates online. The results of the online survey, oftentimes do not deviate significantly from the actual results after several elections. This is to show that social media is viable to provide useable data on crucial issues.

Furthermore, information is easily disseminated through the social media more than other conventional media. Social media platforms are available on cell phones which users carry along with them everywhere. This makes it easy for information to be accessed anytime and anywhere without difficulty. The strength of the social media in terms of population makes its a viable platform for dissemination of information such as politics, sports, finance, events, trends, crime, etc. News are easily accessed online or through the social media. This is one of the reasons why every conventional news outlet must have online channels also to cater for millions of subscribers who may not be able to get news from television, radio and newspaper. Thus, there are a plethora of online television, radio and newspapers because a lot of users have shifted focus to online realities.

Propaganda is a political mechanism that dots the media space, especially in the present age and time. Propaganda means a concerted set of messages targeted at a large number of people with the aim of influencing opinion and behaviour. Since social media is known for large audience and also for its ability to influence opinion and behaviour, politicians see it as a viable medium for engagement. Be that as it may, most propaganda messages in Nigeria tend to project negative tendencies with the aim of derailing and killing images of political opponents. In some cases, these engagements culminate into hate speeches which is considered inimical to political stability and national unity.

Also, the nature of Nigerians and the political culture set the tone for the deployment of propaganda as a welcome measure. Oftentimes, users of social media are culpable in the sense that they share such messages and allow them to spread like wild fire. In this case, objectivity is usually obscured and values are pushed to the background. The meeting point between politician and voters becomes the social media. Although, a lot of political issues are projected and promoted by the conventional media, but actual participation and engagements are centred on social media. The existence of

influencers constitutes a major factor in the use of propaganda messages.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the interplay that exist between politicians and voters in Nigeria and has shown that social media acts as the arena in which both meets. Robust interactions in this space is as a result of the characteristics of the social media which includes: interactivity, feedback, capacity to engage various media, timeliness, etc. These have been able to create room for decision making based on reasons, facts and figure. It also acts as checks and balances necessary for monitoring and evaluating electoral processes and government systems. It is recommended that this arena be free and transparent to encourage effective participation. Adequate policy framework can guarantee this purpose. Thus, it is through this that the democratic ideals in Nigeria can be achieved.

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