AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICAL EDUCATION AND MOBILIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The advent of the Internet has triggered the emergence of improved and user-friendly media tools known as social media. These media channels allow the effective sharing of audio-visual messages across the globe within seconds with the click of the button. As a result of their (social media) effectiveness in the provision of entertainment, information and education across societies, they are seen as being handy in facilitating the political education and mobilization of the people. Political Education is an essential element for the development and consolidation of democratic societies, and also an indispensable tool for the success of political parties. In political education, social media have the potentials of enhancing the sharing of information about political parties, their candidates, policies and programmes (manifestoes) including rallies and campaign activities. With political education via social media, this goes a long way in mobilizing people to participate in political activities such as attending political gatherings, voter registration and participating in elections. Thus, social media play significant roles in the provision of political education and mobilization of the people. Against this backdrop, it is recommended that governments and non-governmental organisations alike should ensure that they incorporate the use of social media with the mainstream media of information sharing for the provision of the needed education on politics and governance for further political mobilization of the people. Also, political parties, candidates and other political movements should not leave behind social media outlets while embarking on the political communication of their programmes, policies and manifestoes.
Introduction

The growth of modern technology and the ever changing complex nature societies of the world have revolutionalized the way and manner information gathering and dissemination is carried out. Citizens, with this development, have utilised the opportunity created by modern technologies in satisfying their quest to keep abreast of happenings around them. The internet has become the biggest technological revolution of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century with a sizeable number of the population of the world having access to it. It is now the biggest market place where one can find products, services, information, ideas and knowledge at the mere click of a button. The use of these technologies is the provision of efficient, cost-effective and convenient sharing of vital information among the people via online media tools known as the social media.

The term social media refers to web-based tools and services that allow users to create, share, and search for content and information without having to log on to any specific portal site or portal destination”. These tools have become “social” in the sense that, they are created in ways that enable users to share and communicate with one another. Social media are media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social dialogues.

The rapid growth of social media activities especially over the last three years is indicative of its entry into mainstream culture, and its integration into the daily lives of many people especially the youths. Westerman, Spence and Heide (2012:201) note that the social media have gained increased usage rapidly for a variety of reasons. News and information is one such reason. The social media landscape might seem like foreign ground and in comprehensible to those accustomed to reading mainstream media alone. The intensity and speed of
news items posted online can be a cause of stress for politicians who are forced to respond almost immediately in today’s political climate. Contrast this to the past where politicians would only be required to issue a press release within the day, in time for the following day’s news run.

With the aid of social media, there is perfect access to all sides of a story, a utopia of limitless information in a society that was considered shielded in the past. One might imagine so, since alternative media are freely accessible online. In one sense, it is true that a wide range of news, opinion pieces and videos are readily available to the public. On the other hand, social media has also changed the way news is channeled and read. News items are now user-driven, no longer centred on the publisher of the website per se. It is customary for the social media generation to scan their live feeds on Facebook or Twitter and pick the stories that are the most interesting shared by their friends (Yeoh, 2012).

Due to the effectiveness of social media in the sharing of entertaining, informative and educative messages, the relatively new media is handy for political education of the people especially the youths who form a greater number of those with access to social media channels. Rita (2012) is of the view that the “new media can have an impact by helping to transform individuals and give them new competencies that empower them in politics”. Also commenting on the effectiveness of the social media for political education Yeoh (2012) notes that the people rely on the internet – and social media networks – to build their understanding of political coalitions on their policy positions, including education, the economy, housing, religion, crime and so on, to equip them with the knowledge necessary for their voting decision.

In fact, the social media can serve as potent tools in educating the people about the electoral process. The people can be educated about political parties, their candidates and manifestoes. That is, the social media here help in the
formation of the opinions and attitudes of the people as regards the existing political parties, candidates and their promises. Ifukor (2010:82) states that “citizen’s access to electronic social media empowers them to actively involve in democratic governance”

In the Nigerian political process, the use of social media became more pronounced in the 2011 General Elections especially among the youths. Most political aspirants in Nigeria including President Goodluck Jonathan, Mallam Nuhu Ribadu, Pastor Chris Okotie, used Facebook, Twitter, Naija Pals, Nairaland among others to engage the youths in discussing their political programmes and policies. In their views on the use of social media for political education, Adamic and Glance (2005:88) note that “the John Kerry and George Bush political campaign teams adopted the use of blog. Incidentally, Bush’s blog had more posts to prospective young adult voters than Kerry’s”. Ifukor (2010:30) also notes that: “In 2008, Barack Obama and his campaign team also used blogs and Twitter to disseminate crucial information about Obama’s bid for the presidency”. Similarly, Kelly and Etling (2008:15) assert that “the Iranian blogosphere liberalized political discourse in the face of a hostile media environment and Twitter was used by ordinary citizens to provide insider up-to-date information about the Iranian 2009 post-election protests”.

It is on record that, the recent American President, George W. Bush (Jnr) and the current American President, Barack Obama effectively used the social media channels like the Facebook, Twitter, Youtube etc to mobilize electorates particularly the youths to support their political aspirations. For instance, Bvandorn (2012) writes that the social media is acting as a new way for common people to become increasingly educated on the politics of the United States. According to Bvandorn (2012), social media is also a very powerful tool for politicians and that since young political enthusiasts turn toward social
media for political insight, politicians also take advantage of this new media market.

Today, Nigerian politicians and their political parties at one time or the other utilize the social media tools to provide vital information and education to the people about their programmes and/or manifestoes. That is, the social media serve as veritable tools in the hands of politicians and others alike in providing relevant political education to the citizens. It is against this backdrop that this research study investigates the use of social media and its influence on political education and mobilization.

**Conceptual Clarifications**

**Social Media**

Social media, basically, concerns all forms of new media technology that offers interactive sharing of information, videos, pictures, text and comments with such websites as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Linkedin, Youtube and Blogs. These social media channels serve effectively in facilitating communication locally and globally. Facebook, for example, have today gained global prominence among the people as it serves reasonably in the sharing of audio-visual and/or textual messages.

In 2004, Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg created Facebook as a way to connect with fellow students. Initially adopted by high school and college students, the social network, according to its 2012 initial public offering filing, has grown to 845 million active users worldwide, with approximately 161 million active monthly users in the US, making it the premiere social media service in the world. If Facebook were a country it would be the third largest behind China and India. Launched in July 2006, Twitter is an online social networking and micro blogging service that has grown to over 300 million users as of 2011, according to account tracker Twopcharts. It allows users to
exchange photos, videos, and messages of 140 characters or less. Founded in 2005 by Steve Chen and Chad Hurley, YouTube provides a forum for the distribution of video content – everything from cute kittens sleeping to first-run television programs to eyewitness videos of political protests. The two created the site based on their own frustration when trying to share video files.

Part of the attraction of these “big three” social media services and independent blogging is that the average person, with little or no advanced computer skills, can have good success using them; content can be created and accessed with as little as a smart phone; and it can be easily intertwined. Links to videos posted on YouTube can be embedded in blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. A Twitter post can appear on a Facebook page. In other words, large numbers of people can be easily and inexpensively contacted via a variety of services.

**Political Education**

Political Education is an essential element for the development and consolidation of democratic societies, and also an indispensable tool for the success of political parties. In general, political education comprises all those processes that influence and shape people politically as members of a social and political system. This can happen by formal institutions like schools or universities, mass media or membership in groups and organizations.

In a more specific sense, political education refers to consciously planned and organised continuous and targeted activities of formal institutions to train and prepare youths and adults for their active participation in political and social life. Basically, Political education aims:

- to develop and strengthen awareness about the values of a liberal democracy
to transmit understanding of the main political institutions (parliament, government, elections and voting, political parties) and the functioning of the political decision-making process,

- to promote a basic knowledge in all of the most important political issues
- to teach certain skills such as how to approach information, media etc.

### Political Mobilization

This concerns motivating people towards participating in political activities such as contesting for elective positions, registering as voters, voting and a host of other activities relating to politics and governance.

### Theoretical Framework

The *Agenda Setting theory* has been utilized as the theoretical framework for this discourse. The theory was propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. The theory presupposes that public agenda or what kinds of things people discuss, think and worry about (and sometimes ultimately press for legislation about) are powerfully shaped and directed by what the news media chose to publicize.

Basically, the agenda setting theory assumes that:

- a) The mass media, such as the press, do not reflect social reality because news is filtered, chosen and shaped by newsroom staff or broadcasters.
- b) People get their news from limited sources because people do not pay attention to all outlets; thus they rest on the mass media.
c) Few media agendas, which were chosen by professional gatekeepers, lead people to perceive given issues as important.

The theory proposes that the fact which people know about public issues tend to be those which the mass media present to them. Also, the significance which the people ascribe to the same issues tends to be proportionate to the amount of attention given to the same issue in the media.

It is usually assumed that the media set the agenda for people to discuss but the media are not responsible for making the people think, they are interested in what the people think about. The people have the right to think what they want to think, but interestingly, people tend to think alongside those things the media highlight as important.

The following could be responsible for agenda setting:

i. The number of times an issue is reported

ii. Using headlines and picture display

iii. Reports that give room for “points and counter-points.

The agenda setting theory emanates from a specific perspective, because it tends to predict that if we are exposed to the same media, we will place importance on the same issues. The theory is good at explaining why people with similar media exposure place importance on the same issues. Although, different people may feel differently about the issue at hand, most people feel the same issues are important.
Failure of the broadcast and print media to set agenda for public discussion may lead or pave way for rumour mongering and the public would rely on news emanating from grapevine which may pave way for conflict.

Thus, agenda setting theory can be viewed as one which examines the relationship between media priorities and audience priorities in the relative importance of news topics. The theory can be seen as one which entails that the importance members of the public attach to issues or policies largely depends on how best the mass media portray them.

The relevance of the agenda setting theory to this research study can be understood in the theory’s provision that the media can bring to public glare issues that can be taken up by the public for their good. For example, the social media, through the messages they disseminate to the people, have the capacity to politically educate the people on the need to take certain actions that enhance their socio-economic, political and cultural development. In this wise, the messages disseminated using social media can provide to the people the needed education on politics and governance. Such messages can persuade (mobilize) them to participate in certain activities relating to governance and politics.

**Research Objectives**

This research study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To establish whether social media have any impact on political education of the people in Benue State.
2. To find out the extent to which the use of social media has provided political education to the people in Benue State.

3. To identify the ways through which social media has provided political education to the people of Benue State.

**Research Questions**

1. Do social media have any impact on political education of the people in Benue State?

2. What is the extent to which the use of social media has provided political education to the people in Benue State?

3. What are the ways through which social media has provided political education to the people of Benue State.

**Review of Related Literature**

The mass media are increasingly serving the needs of people across the globe in different ways. Moving away from the traditional mass media, social media have been adopted from its inception by people as tools for interaction and entertainment. With modern technology, people do not have to wait for some time before feedback is made. Various empirical studies conducted over the years leave little doubt that, given exposure, media content can and does influence youngsters’ level of socialisation, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Indeed, the evidence is so ample that few mass communication scholars hesitate to list social media as equal in importance to most other socialization agents like parents, schools, and churches. Few notable examples will suffice.

While writing on the impact of the media in people’s everyday life, Lewis (2010) rightly observes that users of social media are no longer passive consumers. They could be creators or producers of information. Internet tools such as blogs, *YouTube, Flickr, MySpace* and *Facebook* allow the average person to create content that can be shared with a worldwide audience. Dwyer
(2006) cited in Lewis (2010) was more specific from his findings, which indicate that youths use social networking to help them maintain relationships with friends. Maintenance of already established virtual community through Facebook and MySpace in particular has also been acknowledged by Boyd and Ellison (2007). According to these authors, even bloggers, who choose to be anonymous to the broader public, are part of an identifiable circle of bloggers, who respond to each other and also meet in real life.

The interactive nature of the social media tools has transformed media messages from delayed feedback that characterised traditional mass media to facilitating instantaneous dialogue. Because teens and young adults are among the first to adopt and utilise these easily accessible tools, it is assumed that they are also among the most knowledgeable about how to employ those tools (Loretto, 2009).

Despite the fact that social sites like LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter and Facebook are considered as favoured avenues for forming relationships, Clark (2008) looks at them differently. Citing Clark, Dominick (2011: 447) illustrates his ambivalence based on the outcome of a survey conducted in 2007 when he asserts that:

In the first place, many profiles were simply abandoned. About 20 per cent were no longer active when the analysis took place. Another 5 per cent were profiles of entertainers, politicians, or other celebrities where building relationships was secondary to their commercial purpose. Of the remaining profiles, most were seldom used. About 50 per cent of the owners had not logged in within the previous two and a half months, and 20 percent hadn’t logged in for more than a year.

Thus, if the above position is accepted, it means that people generally do not utilise the social media as intensive as one would believe. Their media use is
limited by what Albury (2003:108) postulates as everyday circumstances of time, budget and other personal pressures.

A fundamental fact we cannot rule out, however, is that like the handset, where people have internet services, regularly for social networking, is always connected. In most of the households Bouvard and Kurtzman (2000:1) studied, the computer was on and connected to the web whenever anyone was in the house. Accordingly, there were also many new ways that people are using the web and many changes from earlier patterns of web use. Broadly speaking, people still want information, entertainment, and communications with others through the new media.

The ways in which these appetites are satisfied have changed and other behaviours have emerged based on the characteristics of broadband web access. For instance, Carey (2004:196) found that:

When people get e-mail throughout the day, it starts to take on some of the functionality of a telephone. First, in order to know that new e-mail was coming in, many households set a tone to ring or an artificial voice to speak whenever the e-mail arrived. In this way, they could hear the tone or voice even if they were in another part of the house, much like a telephone ringing. Second, the constant availability of e-mail encouraged some to develop a relationship with others that relied on near real-time communication. That is, others learned over time that these people in broadband households would get messages almost instantly and could reply very quickly.

Taken, therefore, that youth are dutifully attached to the social media, the sites they use are tied to their daily media practices. This agrees with the assertion made by Okorie and Tunji (2011:116) that a study conducted in the United States on social networking sites reveals that 50 per cent of young people between 12 and 17 years logged on daily to social networking sites; 22 per cent logged on to social networking sites several times per day; 26 per cent of the
young people logged on to *Facebook* once a day; and 17 per cent logged on to *Facebook* three to five days per week. Most of the young people who log on these sites, Walter (2006) remarks, do so for fun, to organise parties and to find dates. This is not too different from Bickham’s (2004) finding, considering the social context of media use that youth spent a higher percentage of their media use time with their friends.

We can, therefore, subscribe Bickham’s (2004) conclusion that sharing media with friends is seen as an indication of healthy friendships, while co-using media with siblings is positively linked to social isolation.

**Review of Empirical Works/Studies**


The broad objective of this study was to explore and examine critically the extent to which the social media provides opportunity for people to send, receive and perceive messages relating to politics and politicking. The specific objectives of this study included:

(i) To assess the influence of social media on the voting pattern of Nigerian youths in the 2011 general elections.  
(ii) To assess the role of social media in creating political awareness to Nigerian youths in the 2011 general elections in Benue State.  
(iii) To find out if social media is an efficient tool for youths mobilization.  
(iv) To assess the attitude of Nigerian youths on the use of social media.

The study adopted the survey research method and used questionnaire as instrument for data collection.

Based on the findings from the study indications were ripe that social media have tremendous influence on the activities of Nigerian youths. A survey carried out indicated that most youth in the study area are members of various social media channels especially the Facebook, 1on1.com Nijapals among
others where they follow political debates, like the debate on zoning of presidency in the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). Other political discussions also feature on this forum and the youths follow keenly the debates, the campaign messages and online chatting with candidates that register on the social media network. By doing so, they take decisions based on their convictions concerning who to support and how to get involved in the political process.

The study also indicated that social media forum provides an ample opportunity for Nigerians to participate in social and political interactions/debates. This reveals the willingness of the people to participate in political matters that affect them; it also highlights the need to make political governance accessible to people. Because online social media have the advantage of combining speed and currency with the facility that enables asynchronous computer-mediated discourse (CMD) to be stored and archive messages at the addressee’s site until they are read, interactants are able to monitor and follow-up socio-political debates to their conclusions.

Discussion forums enable participants within and outside Nigeria to disseminate their views on important political issues while remaining anonymous. We can conclude, therefore, that the emergence of the online social media like Facebook and other discussion forums is enabling Nigerians to be involved in political debates much more than ever before. More voices are being heard, social problems are being discussed and more people are participating in political debates especially the youths.

This form of social and political participation is likely to increase in the future since online awareness is already created and bloggers are getting involved in computer-mediated discourse. Political involvement and participation in governance defines the concept of citizenship in the
context of political discourse on Facebook, Nijapals, Nolitics, etc. Interestingly, with Nigerian politicians coming on Facebook and registering their own blogs, there is no doubt that the general influence generated from contributions by the people via the social media, would shape social morality and political performance.

Social media no doubt have massive patronage among Nigerian youths however, most of them use the channels for social interaction more than other purposes so if there is sustained awareness on the use of the channels and politicians are encouraged to use it as one of the channels for reaching to the electorates, more people will turn to social media for political discussions, debates and opinions on the web are mere gossips and rumours which most a times are baseless.

On the part of the government, mass literacy should be encouraged and sustained. New media technologies should not be seen as luxury but major factors in the development of a nation and its people especially in the area of corporate governance. Subsequently, necessary infrastructures and enabling policies should be put in place and maintained at the three tiers of government, viz: Federal, State and Local.

“The Changing Media Landscape and the Changing Social Context of Media Use by Youths” by Patrick Udende and Adisa R.M.

The objectives of this study were to: (i) determine the most frequently used social network by youth (ii) determine how much time youth devote to the networking site (iii) find out whether or not youth prefer online relationship to face-to-face interaction (iv) ascertain the type of cyber relationship youth make (v) determine the number of youth involved in social networking.

The survey method was employed for this study. Study population was made up of students of the University of Ilorin, Nigeria. A total of 300 students were selected. The questionnaire was directly administered on the sample which
was purposively selected to collect data. Major findings from this study were as presented below:

Regardless of the fact that we have numerous social networking sites, most of the respondents use Facebook as their favourite platform. This is evident from data depicted on table one where 60.8 per cent are subscribers of the site.

On how long respondents have been using their sites, data reveal that 44.9 per cent of total respondents have been using it for a period of between one and five years, and 37.1% have been using it for more than five years. Interestingly too, most of the students (50.9 per cent) spend between one and two hours interacting, just as 37.8 percent spend between two and three hours for similar purpose. Besides, 55.1 per cent visit their sites occasionally, and 38.2 per cent visit theirs daily, while 4.2 per cent and 2.5 per cent of the respondents use their sites twice in a week or once in a week respectively.

Expectedly, most (59%) of the respondents answered in the affirmative that they preferred online interaction to face-to-face communication. This could be due to easy access and the anonymity social networking provides for subscribers. As a corollary to the above, a greater number (83.8%) of respondents were convinced that social media enhance their relationship with others.

In line with findings from the study, the researchers concluded thus:

Social media are radically different from traditional mass media. One dominant feature of the former is the opportunity of interactivity which is lacking in the latter. Nevertheless, with the emergence of the internet, there is convergence as traditional mass media can be accessed online and used in varying ways. The presence of social networking sites offers considerable opportunities for both the teeming and future youth. Youths turn attention to their computer and smartphone screens to engage in social networking more often than they do to the radio, television screen, cinema, newspaper and
magazine. As it is, they are looking to social media among their top sources for news, information, and above all, entertainment and social interaction. As a result, social media are having an enormous impact on social context to which youth use them.

The following were the recommendation of the researchers:

Spending longer hours on social media for fun, chatting or entertainment could be counter-productive. Students in particular should be economical in their use of time and much of it be devoted to cross-fertilisation of ideas that will develop them academically.

Despite the fact that social media provide users the anonymity to freely interact with different people globally, subscribers should utilise the facility responsibly. This can be done by self-censorship of obscene language, type of clips/pictures, and other entertainment materials posted which have potentials of offending sensibilities.

Other complementary and emerging social sites like 2go, Badoo, Whatsapp, Ebuddy, Nimbuzz, Sisters Zone, Skype, just to mention few, provide ample opportunity for users to just like the favoured facebook. Operators should ensure that the mechanism of using them is stress-free for greater appeal.

**Conclusion**

Social media, basically, has to do with all forms of new media technology that offers interactive sharing of information, videos, pictures, text and comments with such websites as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Linkedin, Youtube and Blogs. Political Education is an essential element for the development and consolidation of democratic societies, and also an indispensable tool for the success of political parties. In general, political education comprises all those processes that influence and shape people politically as members of a social and political system. Social media play significant roles in the provision of political education to the people.
**Recommendations**

Based the findings from the literature and empirical works reviewed, it is pertinent to recommend that:

- Governments and non-governmental organisations alike should ensure that they incorporate the use of social media with the mainstream media of information sharing for the provision of the needed education on politics and governance.

- Political parties, candidates and other political movements should not leave behind social media outlets while embarking on the political communication of their programmes, policies and manifestoes. This is due largely to the capability of social media outfits in the provision of political education to the people. This can also enhance the political mobilization of the people.

- Media outfits and their personnel should incorporate their political communication strategies with the social media in a bid to reach larger number of audience with messages that bring about political education and mobilization.
REFERENCES


