

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE

EDET ABIA

Department of Mass Communication
Ikot Osurua Polytechnic, Akwa Ibom State
legendmarshal@gmail.com

EMEM U. OKON

Department of Mass Communication
Ikot Osurua Polytechnic, Akwa Ibom State
Ememokon870@gmail.com

NNAMDIE UDO KIERIAN

Department of Mass Communication
Obio Akpa Campus, Akwa Ibom State University
nnamdiegodwill@gmail.com

Abstract

Digital media technology has become the "mouthpiece" of the millennium. It provides the much-needed oxygen for universal democratisation processes and is considered the most suitable for the expression of opinion on public affairs, issues and debates. The aim of this study is to identify the digital technologies used in political communication, find out ways that digital technologies affect citizen participation in the political process, and assess the impact and challenges of digital technologies on political communication. The qualitative research method was applied in order to answer the stated objectives. The researchers relied on materials from Google Scholar for the review.. Findings from the study showed that digital technologies have widely become indispensable for political communication. The study identified tools such as mobile phones and social media (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Youtube, Instagram, and Telegram) as new digital media tools and platforms used for political communication. The study also revealed that new media tools are used for campaigns, mobilization, and participation. The study concluded that political communication relies heavily on digital media to thrive. Hence, it recommended responsible application of media technology to political communication to enhance democracy in our society.

Keywords: Political communication, Digital media, Traditional media, Fake news, Hate speech.

Introduction

Citizens of nations have the ability and the legal right to use the digital media, particularly social media, to share their views and opinions with the world. Access to digital media and use of them continue to be crucial resources. There is no denying that Internet usage has increased over the past 20 years, particularly in Africa and Nigeria. According to the Internet world states report (2019), the global Internet penetration rate as of June 2019 was 4422,494,622, whereas it was 525,148,631 in Africa. With a population of 200 million (962, 417 as of June 2019), Nigeria is seeing a significant change in internet usage. The penetration rate rose substantially from 200,000 in 2000 to 123,486 in 2006. The large disparity in the data shows unequivocally that most Nigerians have grown more Internet-hungry and aware, perhaps as a result of the pervasiveness and disruptiveness of new media technologies.

The use of digital media technologies to reach voters during elections is crucial for political parties, candidates, and the election process itself since social media is now having an impact on political campaigns. It is essential for educating the public about politics, elections, and campaigns (Morah & Uzochukwu, 2021). Digital media also has an impact on the problems that voters should be concerned about during elections and the standards that voters should use to assess candidates. In the past, despite their limitations in direct contact, conventional media such as newspapers, television, radio, billboards, and printed materials such as pamphlets and letters, were essential instruments for disseminating reliable political campaign messages. Facebook and Twitter, in particular, are in fierce conflict with conventional media. Mirer and Bode (2015, p. 454) argued that the advent of the internet as a popular communication tool was a "transformative moment in media technology, with consequences for the practise of politics" in particular.

Globally, the digital revolution has enabled enormous changes that have resulted in improved public access to information, the creation of new entry points for goods and services, and more chances for civic involvement and social networking with larger groups (Oparaugo, 2021). The use of ICTs in political communication has sparked optimism for its potential democratic influence as well as fears about impending challenges, as with any new communication technique. More crucially, it is believed that the use of digital media has significantly mediated and transformed political institutions and actions. Loader and Mercea (2011) acknowledged that digital media technologies have a significant impact on the public's access to information and government records, political campaign tactics and messages, voter attitudes and preferences, activist activities to spread their views, and how issues enter the public conversation. According to Morah and Uzochukwu (2021, p.2), "politicians have been using digital media, like any other effective communication tool, to interact with voters and constituents more

effectively." For instance, social media was essential for organising the grassroots and registering voters during Muhamadu Buhari's presidential campaign in 2014 (Opeibi, 2015). The Internet and other new media technologies have altered how politicians conduct their campaigns and serve in office via organising, fundraising, and press coverage. Social media, unlike conventional mainstream media, is founded on a two-way communication paradigm, so it is crucial to research how politicians are utilising it.

The use of new media technologies to reach voters during campaigns is crucial for political parties, candidates, and the election process itself since social media is now having an impact on political campaigns. It is essential for raising awareness about politics, elections, and campaigns. Social media also have an impact on the problems that voters should be concerned about during elections and the standards that voters should use to judge the candidates. However, this study critically examines the use of digital media for political communication purposes.

Statement of the Problem

Digital technologies have transformed the way political communication has been conducted in most parts of the world. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have provided politicians with a wealth of opportunities to campaign and communicate with their electorate in novel and creative ways. The use of the internet for political communication purposes has been studied by many scholars, including Hill and Hughes (1998); McChesney, (2000); Norris (2001); Mcnamara (2008); and Lev-On (2011). The use of digital technologies in political communication, like any new communication practice, has sparked both hopes for its potential democratic impact and concerns about impending adversities. In particular, the studies dated 2004 have designated the risks of such a development, pointing out the threats to social consistency and the debate over the digital divide (Hoffman & Novak, 1998). Nonetheless, many of these studies were conducted prior to the emergence of Web 2.0 communication technology. The advent of social media such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter has led to a modernisation of political communication (Carpenter, 2010). Politicians around the world have increasingly sought to capitalise on the new opportunities offered by the Web 2.0 applications, and they have embarked on new campaigning strategies, new modes of fundraising, mobilization, and information gathering.

Despite the widespread use of ICTs in political campaigning, there are still concerns about their significant capacity to empower democracy by encouraging greater participation, encouraging political discourse, and improving interactive information-sharing (Jackson, 2007).As such, there is a pertinent need for more studies to examine if and how the new media have impacted on democracy.

This paper contributes to a growing volume of research that seeks to examine the potential of digital media platforms to animate political communication, increase political participation, and provide a new repertoire of collective action.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The following objectives guided the direction of this study:

1. To identify the digital technologies used in political communication.
2. To find out how digital technologies affect citizen participation in the political process.
3. To ascertain the impact and challenges of digital technologies on political communication.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Media, Politics and Political Communication

The term "media," which is the plural of "medium," refers to the communication channels through which we disseminate news, music, movies, education, promotional messages, and other data. It includes physical and online newspapers and magazines; television, radio, billboards, telephones, the Internet, fax, and billboards (Wellman, 2000). It describes the various ways in which people communicate in society. Because it refers to all means of communication, everything ranging from a telephone call to the evening news on television can be called media. Kushin and Yamamoto (2010) explain that mass media organ is any source that sends information to the public (masses). It can include sources like newspapers, magazines, the internet, TV, radio, etc. TV and radio are not mass media per se, but they become mass media only when they have the connection and they are capable of accessing the media, so they are the sources. Social media is a collection of online communication channels where communities interact, share content, and collaborate.

Politics, in its broadest sense, is the activity through which people make, preserve, and amend the general rules under which they live (Duru & Morah, 2015). Duru and Morah (2015) explain that politics is defined by interactions between states in the international arena; the activities of politicians; and activities such as voting (in national, regional, or local elections) through which individual citizens engage with the state. Politics is about much more than the activities (or careers) of politicians.

Communication involves transmission of verbal and non-verbal messages. Asemah (2011, p.1) sees it as "the process by which information is passed between individuals". It consists of a sender, a receiver, and a channel of communication. In the process of transmitting messages, the clarity of the message may be interfered with or distorted by what is often referred to as barriers (Munodawafa, 2008). Communication is the transfer of information, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, and

opinions from a source to a receiver with the presence or absence of feedback. In the political communication process, the source is the politician, and the receiver (s) is the electorate. The essence of politics is talk or interaction. Broadly defined, political communication is the role of communication in the political process (Asemah, 2011). It can take place in a variety of forms (formal or informal), in a variety of venues (public and private), and through a variety of media (mediated or unmediated content). It includes the production and generation of messages by political actors; the transmission of political messages through direct and indirect channels; and the reception of political messages. Political communication is the dissemination of political information among and between political elites, mass media organizations, and the public (Gervais, 2016).

Political communication refers to the process that involves citizens, the news media, political institutions and players, and so on (Christian, 2016). Christian (2016) explains that every political communication effort made by parties, stakeholders, or the media is directed at the public in order to enlighten and persuade them. In political communication, how these three groups interact is crucial (Munodawafa, 2008). Communication in politics can proceed in many different directions, including upward from people and groups to political institutions; horizontally between political players, including the media; and downward from authorities to citizens. Political communication is, in essence, concerned with actively engaging with municipal, ethnic, state, national, European, and world affairs and how the influence of information, persuasion, and strategically designed messages can be used to understand and have significant direct effects at those stages, notably in terms of governance and societal and governmental behaviour.

Political communication began with the earliest studies of democratic discourse by Aristotle and Plato. However, modern political communication relies on an interdisciplinary basis, which draws on concepts from communication, political science, journalism, sociology, psychology, history, rhetoric, and others (Gervais, 2016). This two-volume resource considers political communication from a broad interdisciplinary perspective, encompassing the many different roles that communication plays in political processes in the United States and around the world (Kaid and Holtz-Bacha, 2007). Norris (2001) opines that political communication is an interactive process concerning the transmission of information among politicians, the news media, and the public. The process operates downward from governing institutions toward citizens, horizontally in linkages among political actors, and also upward from public opinion toward authorities. Political communication has always been central to the electoral and policymaking process, but since the early 1990s, certain important developments have fundamentally altered this process, particularly postwar trends in the mass media moving from the

traditional world of newspapers, radio, and television broadcasting toward the Internet.

Digital Media and Politics

The emergence of social media has changed the way in which political communication takes place in the world all over today. Political institutions such as politicians, political parties, foundations, institutions, and political think tanks are all using social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter to communicate with and engage voters. Regular individuals, politicians, "pundits," and thought leaders alike are able to voice their opinions, engage with a wide network, and connect with other likeminded individuals (Kearney, 2013).

Because they provide unlimited access to different categories of target audience, hybrid features of online media outlets are assets to politicians in both developed and developing democracies (Okoye & Oparaugo, 2019). The use of new media in election campaigns is not a recent trend. However, its significance has increased steadily over time. In Nigeria, for example, the then-President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan used Facebook for his campaign, despite the fact that Facebook was not a popular election campaign medium in Nigeria at the time. By 2015, it had become more popular and widely used, especially among the youths, and by 2019, even local government chairmen's election campaigns were equally done using social media platforms.

Before the emergence of social media, the traditional media could determine, to a large extent, what information should be aired to the public and set the agenda for public discourse. McCombs and Shaw (1972) cited in Okoye and Oparaugo (2019), asserted that "the mass media force attention to certain issues." They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the public should think about, know about, and have feelings about". They insisted that a small number of mass media news producers dominate the market, and therefore, audiences only get information about what the media decides is important enough to be covered. By providing politicians with a platform to speak directly to their constituents and potential voters without the traditional media intermediary, social media has significantly reduced the traditional media's agenda-setting role (Gillin, 2008).

The ubiquitous presence of social media has taken control of contemporary human life in almost all aspects. It will not be an exaggeration to state that social media have ushered in the biggest media revolution since the invention of the printing press. The political class, leaders, and candidates for various political positions have made extensive use of social media (Thummy, 2015). The ongoing revolution in information and communication technologies (ICTs) has

fundamentally transformed the landscape of democracy and the way people engage in politics. From the configuration of media systems to the decision-making of the voting public, the changes have permeated through almost every level of society, affecting political institutions, political actors, citizen groups, and mass media (Wei & Xu, 2019). New media has been playing an increasingly central role in American elections since they first appeared in 1992. While television remains the main source of election information for a majority of voters, digital communication platforms have become prominent. New media has triggered changes in the campaign strategies of political parties, candidates, and political organizations; reshaped election media coverage; and influenced voter engagement (Owen, 2017).

The new media's influence on elections has been substantial. Campaigns provide a laboratory for the development of political applications that carry over to postelection politics and establish new norms for media politics in subsequent contests. The social media innovations that rose to prominence in the 2008 presidential contest became standard practise in the 2010 midterm elections and set the stage for the more prolific development of political applications for handheld devices than was the case in 2004, when the Bush campaign used handheld devices to show campaign ads door to door. As technology continues to advance and the number of social media platforms proliferates, the election media environment has become more diversified, specialized, and fragmented. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have been joined by a host of platforms, such as Reddit, Pinterest, Snapchat, and Vine that support campaign activities.

Today, the internet and social media are widely used in all areas. Social media, which is the focus of attention for young people, has started to attract every age group as it has expanded its fields. In addition to the socialisation of people, it also satisfies many personal and social needs such as entertainment, information, and communication. It's being easily accessible and appealing to a wide audience makes social media attractive in the political sphere (Dasli, 2019). Providing political participation and carrying out political campaigns are not only applicable to the public; statesmen can also easily carry out their work through social media. The election activities of the parties, election campaigns, announcements, and all kinds of actions for the public are presented on social media accounts. People choosing political parties that are close to their own ideology and spreading this ideology to large communities through social networks results in large masses of people rather than individuals who want to influence the young can increase their votes by making their own propaganda with a good tactic. However, the lack of this seems to be an indicator of the unconscious use of social media.

Digital Media in Developed Countries: Obama's Election Campaign as the Model

Researchers interested in online journalism can learn a lot from the Obama campaign. Though that campaign was neither the beginning of the story on the internet's impact on politics nor the end of it, it has opened a new door of intersection between politics and new media (Tau, 2011). The Obama campaign was exceptionally masterful at navigating the rapidly evolving new media landscape. And there are some simply wonderful lessons for those who are interested in online journalism.

The Obama campaign was set out to tap the power of the internet to knit together supporters into a powerful, locally-based network, and it was an unpaid extension of the campaign itself. The Obama campaign staffed up with deliberation. Talented content creators were engaged to create a new media division within the campaign that eventually numbered over one hundred people (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). Those writers and visual artists were experienced professionals in their fields. Their in-house video director had, in fact, been a CNN documentary producer. In addition, top-flight graphic designers were tasked with creating a brand image that would cast Obama as a new kind of politician (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010). The campaign was also a source for civic education. For example, the voters of Florida were taught which forms of identification were now required under changes in voter laws. Those videos were echoed throughout the internet. Once they were posted, they were emailed out to the 13 million or so Americans on the campaign's email list. And they were pushed out to dozens of political bloggers, who embedded them on their blogs (Tau, 2011).

Perhaps the most important point in this discussion was the website MyBarackObama.com, launched by the campaign at the very start of the race. MyBO, as it became known, was the campaign's version of the enormously popular social-networking site Facebook. It was, in fact, directed by Chris Hughes, the 25-year-old Facebook co-founder. But it is critically important that MyBO was never meant to focus on online socializing. Inside the campaign, it was known as a mobilisation network, and the goal was to integrate online and offline action to win the election (MyBO, 2010). Just like the use of the internet, mobile phone short message services were also extensively used to disseminate the messages to the voters. The SMS service was also a source of close contact among the 25000 organisers of the campaign. The service was also used by Obama to deliver words of encouragement to his campaign workers (MyBO, 2010). The Obama campaign was a revolution in new media, technology, and politics. It opened new doors of interaction between the new media and politics, even in other parts of the developed world. This election campaign can serve as a model for election candidates and political parties in developed countries, but it cannot be applied to developing countries, which lack new media technologies due to their socioeconomic situation.

Digital Media and Developing Countries: A Focus on Africa

There are 53 countries in Africa, all very different from each other, sharing, very often, nothing more than common geography. Analyzing the situation of a continent having more than 1000 languages is really a difficult task. At the moment, Africa is poorly connected to the Information Super Highway. In most African countries, the availability of the new media is very limited (Smith, 2011). In particular, the use of the internet is available to rich and wealthy people only. But at the same time, the situation is improving.

For instance, the Ghanaian presidential elections took place in December 2008. The two candidates were John Atta Mills and Nana Akufo-Addo, both political veterans. With only two candidates left in the race, the whole process became more intense. What made this election so different was the widespread use of digital media and of cell phones in particular. This included the candidates and their parties having good websites, being able to deliver some sophisticated multimedia, SMS-based campaigning and fundraising conducted over cell phones, and cell phone-based systems for monitoring. It also included, for the first time, the twittering of results. Some of these elements had never happened in Ghana before, and in fact, had made only partial appearances elsewhere in Africa. Moreover, what might be a first for an African election is that this election offered live coverage on Twitter (Christian, 20016). According to Christian (2016, p.6), "Both candidates in the run-off had Facebook pages." Remarkable was the first widespread use of SMS-based campaigning and SMS-based fund-raising for parties. "Finally, John Atta Mills, defeated twice before in previous presidential elections, won. What happened then? All the leaders of both parties accepted the result. The reason was that an NGO coalition called CODEO put 4,000 monitors in place to do general observation. They used an SMS service to send the information to a central point. Later on, their results were used to verify the official results (Reporters without Borders, 2009).

Also, the Zimbabwe election held in 2008. This country has the highest inflation rate in the history of the world and the lowest life expectancy for just about any nation in the world: 37 years for men and 34 years for women. The state completely controls traditional media in Zimbabwe (Reporters Without Borders, 2009). Radio, TV, and newspapers are almost totally controlled. Even opposition election posters are torn down by state officials. In such a repressive situation, it is no wonder that the opposition, especially those in exile, sets up dozens of websites and innovative ways of using technology and new techniques to keep ahead of the Zimbabwean regime in terms of information flow (Christian, 2016). What was amazing is that many well-constructed websites were created to keep people informed. Like in Ghana, NGOs and the opposition used SMS and MMS to send in

tallies from most of the 11,000 plus polling stations. As a result, President Mugabe lost the elections, but he called for new elections, arguing that 50 percent of the votes were not obtained by anyone in the elections. The first elections were conducted in March, while the second elections happened in June. But now the rules are different. NGOs were forbidden to monitor the elections. The use of SMS and MMS was also banned. Now the results are different. Mugabe won the elections with 85% of the votes and was re-elected President of Zimbabwe (*The Zimbabwe Guardian*, June 29, 2008).

Although, for the time being, African countries are lacking in the use of digital media technology, at the same time, the situation is changing rapidly. With the passage of time, African countries are becoming more democratic. Internet connectivity and the use of cell phones are increasing (*The Zimbabwe Guardian*, 2008). There is definitely a link between the rise of new technology and public participation. Although the situation is getting better, it will take some time to improve the situation. Furthermore, the digital media can also contribute to increasing the transparency of the political and administrative processes. The Whistleblower site of the Kenya Anti-Corruption Commission, supported by the Government of Germany, is one such example. This internet application allows anyone to report corrupt behaviour anonymously and gives the commission the chance to investigate the case in anonymous dialogue. This site can be a role model for other countries to follow to eliminate corruption from their societies.

Theoretical Framework

The Agenda Setting theory was adopted as theoretical framework for this study. Agenda setting has been researched with great interest since the 1960s and the advent of television news. In *Mass Media and Voting*, Lang and Lang (1966) cited by Meraz (2011) noted the importance of not just unbiased coverage but also reportage of all issues. Following this, McCombs and Shaw (1972) cited their definition in research on agenda setting: "The mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, and have feelings about" (p. 177). Only a small number of mass media news producers dominate the market, and therefore, audiences only get information about what the media decides is important enough to cover (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

However, McCombs noted that the emergence of networked media requires more research to address the ultimate power of mass media (1972). Within the Internet era, the agenda-setting theory of mass media still holds relevance, but within this agenda, users have more of an opportunity to seek, create, and share their own content, as explained earlier. The traditional gatekeepers of media

coverage have seen a decrease in control, especially within the US political blogosphere (Meraz, 2011). In researching political blogs in 2007, Meraz (2011) found that they did not always stick to the same issues as covered by the mass media each day, especially right-leaning blogs. Meraz (2011) stated that this is an example of "the growing power of partisan social influence within networked political environments" (p. 120).

For politicians, one of the biggest benefits of social media is the ability for candidates to speak directly to potential voters without a media intermediary (Gillin, 2008). This also creates a more personal relationship. For example, a study of candidates' Facebook pages found that people used the personal term "you" most frequently to refer to the candidate when posting on the page (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). First-name references, last-name references, whole name references, pronouns, and formal titles made up the rest of the postings, in descending order of frequency (Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). This demonstrates more personal relationship by just having a presence on social media, such as Facebook "friends." Using the same appeal as Nixon's well-known "Checker's Speech," candidates succeed when viewed as likeable characters, not just political figures. Social media provide the means to quickly and easily do so, without the need to create so many forced moments and to get this coverage past the traditional gatekeepers.

Methodology

The qualitative method was used to produce the necessary information for a critical analysis of the use of digital technology in political communication. The approach is documentary research, which is a type of research that entails carefully examining documents for information pertaining to the subject topic, subfield, or other pertinent information (Ahmed, 2010). It necessitates a thorough and methodical examination and analysis of documentation, including textual text, visual data, and graphical data (Agbo, Lenshie & Boye, 2018). According to Apuke and Omar (2020), conducting documentary research entails a procedure in which the researcher conducts a meticulous search for materials or data that are pertinent and contain facts and proof.

As a result, the researchers started looking for pertinent materials on Google Scholar, a search engine that facilitates the discovery of scholarly literature on a variety of topics or disciplines. Political communication, political communication with digital technologies, political communication in Nigeria, and instruments utilised for political communication were the search terms used. The search was not, however, limited by publication date or year by the researchers. The search produced 300 useful results that, when looked at broadly, may be regarded as related to the subject. Accordingly, to classify and then choose the final data set that

was afterwards used for this study owing to its relevance, the researchers carefully analysed the articles based on their abstracts, research findings, and conclusions.

Discussion of Findings

Digital Media Use for Political Communication

Considering the power of social media platforms to spread huge amounts of information to a broader audience and mirroring the success of business industries in marketing their products to broader customers in an efficient and effective manner, at present, politicians tend to embrace social media communication as their strategy to communicate with their potential audience (Nulty et al, 2016). Alongside traditional media, social media have now become the main platform for political campaigns to gain support from prospective electorate, fund raising for political parties, and other political purposes. The innovative and extensive use of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and MySpace in the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential campaigns has been a watershed event for modern political communication (Poulakidakos & Veneti, 2016).

Blogs

This is described as "the twenty-first-century version of a diary,"(Hendricks & Denton Jr., 2010, p.9). Their purpose is mainly to share content, most commonly in the form of journal entries, usually written by one author with the addition of pictures and hyperlinks. They allow for the implementation of interactive and connective functions, the most important being commentaries posted below the articles.

Facebook

Facebook founded in 2004 as an internet platform with a private membership for Harvard University students (and since 2006 for the general public), is now the social network with the most active users—more than 1.87 billion (Statista.com, 2017). Facebook allows users to share a variety of content, including unlimited text posts, photos, videos, and links. Additionally, it offers many different tools and applications, such as online mini-games, fund-raising tools, or targeted advertising. Politicians create Facebook accounts and pages in order to reach their supporters directly, as it enables interactivity between the politician and the supporters. However, most of the time, due to their busy schedule and sometimes their limited knowledge of how social media works, these politicians can employ someone to handle their social media page. All information given out on the page or account is with the knowledge and permission of the politician.

Twitter

Originated in 2006, it is an online news and social network allowing users to post and share short messages (originally limited to 140 characters and from November

2017 to 280 characters), which is used by approximately 317 million users (Statista.com, 2017). In contrast to Facebook, Twitter allows following any user even if the account is not protected. Politicians mainly use Twitter for short texts, while they write long epistles on Facebook.

You Tube

YouTube, founded in 2005, enables users to watch videos whose wide range of content includes everything from music to television to debates and even political and educational topics. Although it is necessary to register to post videos, watching them is practically unregulated. Posting content may be a profitable activity since YouTube is connected to the commercial activities of Google. Politicians can upload videos of their campaign rallies on YouTube with a mammoth crowd to show their acceptance and overwhelming popularity in the political space in order to boost their confidence and demoralise their opponents. However, sometimes most of these crowds are filled with party faithful and rented crowds, with some going home with a paltry N2.000. In the case of the incumbent, especially among gubernatorial candidates, some civil servants and associations are forced to be at the venue to receive him or risk sanction. Some major roads are blocked, and at the end, their media aids write on various social media platforms. This state stands still for Adeleke Muhammad Okeke (exemplary name) just to communicate to social media users the acceptability of their candidate.

Web Pages

Web pages serve as the means through which political parties present themselves, they do not serve only as informational sources anymore. They facilitate micro-blogging, opinion polling, the organisation of gatherings and the presentation of audio-visual content. Members can create members-only sections, interconnect their web pages with social media sites, and allow for newsfeed subscriptions.

The impact of digital media on political communication

Recent studies on digital communication media and political activism have highlighted the significant role of digital media in shaping diverse forms of political participation and mobilising large-scale social protests around the world (Chen, Chan, & Lee, 2016; Loader & Mercea, 2011). Digital media such as Twitter and Facebook provide a platform for cognitive, affective, and behavioural connections that enable people to network collaboratively (Sandoval-Almazan & Gil-Garcia, 2014). For instance, digital media provide people with news and mobilising information and allow them to exchange their opinions with many others, motivating them to engage in public activities (Shmargad & Klar, 2019). In addition, digital media content can be quickly updated without expending a significant amount of time, money, or physical effort, which enables digital media

users to easily pursue their communication goals through different activities online (Montgomery & Xenos, 2008).

New media technologies also "provide unlimited access to different categories of target audiences" (Olabamiji, 2014). In other words, technologies allow communication with a target audience regardless of their segmentation. In the era where political communication depended solely on traditional media, mediated communication required audience segmentation. In addition, different programmes need to be designed and structured before a specific audience is targeted. However, in the 21st century, where communication is liberalised as a result of digital media, things are changing and politicians can solicit the participation of the electorate through virtual platforms – this time around new media forms of social media.

New media has been used in political communication in Nigeria for different purposes, ranging from campaigns to policy information dissemination, among other things. Political aspirants have used social media platforms to reach the electorate, providing ease-of-access to information seekers whilst mobilising support (Apuke & Tunca, 2018). Further, Apuke and Tunca observe that social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter can be used to launder the image of a person seeking political office.

Research findings show that social media through marketing have played a significant role in political engagement and participation, replacing traditional media and encouraging collaborations (Nwador, Dike & Henry, 2020). The study also finds that new media tools are mostly or widely used by the younger generation of Nigerians and have proven to be a veritable tool for political marketing. Therefore, it has impacted political communication in that it has brought about a shift in media focus, eliminating over-reliance on traditional media forms.

Similarly, research findings show that digital media, such as social media, play major roles in voter sensitisation and education (Paul, 2019). The electoral umpire in Nigeria, i.e., the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), uses the platforms to sensitise voters ahead of elections. This is also an aspect of political communication. Social media platforms are also used as vehicles for political awareness in Nigeria. In relation to this, Ayeni opines that the government can use social media to get the citizens involved in the decision-making process.

According to Fidelis (2017), new media technologies such as mobile devices and social media played a significant role in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. Fidelis stresses that Nigerian youths engaged one another during the campaigns leading up to the elections on social media platforms and they proved effective. The study attributed the reasons behind the effectiveness of social media in that regard to the anonymity provided by platforms, ease of use, and the speed with which information is processed and disseminated. In particular, the study attributed the success of the elections to digital technologies, as danger was averted due to their

features. During the elections, citizens uploaded results online and even shared photographs of their polling units, deterring people from carrying out acts that could cause chaos and subsequently mar the process.

It is important to note that the advantage offered by new media (digital technologies) is that they are relatively cheap to use for political communication when compared to the traditional forms. A study by Asemah and Edegoh (2012) reveals that politicians will spend less when they take advantage of the new media and utilise the platforms for campaigning, whilst its open-ended access to a vast audience becomes an added advantage. The study equally identified challenges in the use of digital technologies to include epileptic power supply, illiteracy, poverty, and lack of technological know-how, i.e., the requisite expertise in the use of new media.

Digital Media and Political Communication: Challenges

The advent of social media (such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube) has brought about democratisation of communication as the public that hitherto had been considered to be consumers of messages has now also become producers. The platform of social media is open to everyone who has a device, an account to use, and data access or internet access. Communication has never been better or more interesting in the history of man.

Fake news, hate speech, and misinformation are creeping through all social media platforms. With more and more people relying on social media as a source for news, there are worries that such content could influence audiences unable to distinguish truth from fact or news from propaganda (Brooks and Carnahan, 2020). Fake news can be old stories or pictures, which are spread and reported as recent happenings to mislead the public and put them in a state of panic. True as it happened, but the report of it being recent is false, therefore, fake. For example, from time to time, pictures of the Jos religious crisis of 2010 were circulated online in 2019 and 2020 as recent happenings. There are three types of fake news. They are

Disinformation

This is false information, which is deliberately created to cause harm. For example, the news of someone's death to a family member could cause harm, as one could immediately have a stroke, high blood pressure, or even die on hearing the news.

Mal-Information

This is information based on reality but shared to inflict harm, often by moving it from the private to the public sphere. For example, news of someone's ordeal to a

dear one, which is true, but was shared to cause harm, as it could lead to the sudden demise of another.

Misinformation

This is false information not created with the intent of causing harm. For example, a student who comes to tell other students that the exam will begin next week when it has not yet been scheduled. The intent of this is not to cause harm, but to encourage them to study their books. The open nature of the Internet, social media, and the lack of total regulation and restrictions by authorities in Nigeria and the world at large defiles freedom of expression (Wilson & Umar, 2019). Omilusi (2017) describes hate speech as words of incitement and hatred against individuals based upon their identification with a certain social or demographic group. Stressing further, he notes that it may include, but is not limited to, "speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent acts against a particular group, or expressions that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance, which can lead to targeted attacks or persecution of that group."

According to George (n.d), hate speech is any expression that vilifies an identifiable group — a race, religious community, or sexual minority, for example — and thus prompts harm to members. Even free speech advocates agree that hate speech requires special handling, especially when levelled against minorities too weak to counter it in the marketplace of ideas. Hate speech is any speech, gesture, conduct, writing, or display that could incite people to violence or prejudicial action. Essentially, such speeches rob others of their dignity and could cause environmental unrest just like the Boko Haram menace in the country (Ajakaiye, Ojeka, Osueke, Owoeye, Ojeka-John, and Olaniru, 2019).

According to the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2013, p.4), hate speech includes:

- (a) all means of disseminating ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred;
- (b) incitement to hatred, contempt, or discrimination against members of a group on the basis of their race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin;
- (c) threats or incitement to violence against persons or groups on the grounds in (b) above;
- (d) expression of insults, ridicule, or slander of persons or groups.

Fake news and hate speech are gaining ground in the Nigerian polity, especially in the social media and broadcast media spheres. Fake news and hate speech are two mutually exclusive terms and mean different phenomena (Pate & Ibrahim, 2019). However, in the Nigerian context, both terms are often paired, especially in misinformation and inciteful media content contexts. Fake news and hate speech

garnered expressive support from two critical factors "that nurture and sustain [their] continuous existence, namely politics and ethno-religious conflicts" (Lucas & Targema, 2018, p. 27).

In Nigeria, the 2015 and 2019 general elections have also witnessed an upsurge in the use of fake news and hate speech. A clear understanding of the pattern of use and its implications and countermeasures has become even more imperative. Therefore, in line with efforts to understand, focuses on the 2019 elections in Nigeria by apprehending fake news and hate speeches in the run up to, during and after the election with a view to providing a road map for countering the malodorous effects on the polity (Aliogo, 2020).

This phenomenon has reached new height. However, Hassan (2019) noted that ahead of Nigeria's 2019 elections, as the campaign heated up, fake news about both President Muhammadu Buhari and his main opponent, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, has swirled on Whatsapp, Facebook, and Twitter. It has been shared knowingly by canny campaign officials as well as unwittingly by thousands of unsuspecting voters (Hassan, 2019). At this point, every action they take is misinterpreted intentionally by willing political allies on social media to mislead the people and possibly score cheap political points by de-marketing opposition ahead of the election. This false information covers many topics and takes different forms. At the subtler end of the scale, there are examples such as Buhari's aide saying that Atiku only avoided arrest on his US visit because of diplomatic immunity; or the opposition official posting news that "800 companies shut down" even though the story pre-dated Buhari's term. At the wilder end of the scale, there are the claims that President Buhari has been replaced with a Sudanese clone; or that Kim Jong Un wants to re-colonise Nigeria (Hassan, 2019).

Digital media and political participation

Social media technology enables increased, but not necessarily more diverse, participation in political discussions since they are still only available to a small fraction of the population. Social media platforms make participation in the political sphere more convenient. Though they do not guarantee active participation, online political discussions are limited to those with access to computers and the Internet. Therefore, people without access to the Internet do not necessarily pursue political discussion. As a result, online discussions are mostly dominated by a few. While social media has the potential to advance the public sphere, at least in terms of the information that is available to citizens, only a few people are able or willing to take on the challenge. Based on the selected articles that made the final selections and were analysed, we now take on the ways citizen participation is enhanced through digital media:

Enhanced opinion poll avenues and freedom of speech: Research shows that citizen participation is enhanced in the 21st century due to the advancement in technologies (Madueke et al., 2017). Madueke et al. further opine that the internet and associated platforms do not discriminate or bear sentiments, liberalising platforms so people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and traditions can be reached without consideration of any form of sentiment. Digital technologies such as the internet break barriers previously occasioned by geographical and physical factors, in addition to their multiplicity of use at little or no cost. Therefore, the government can take advantage of platforms to conduct opinion polls to get the views of the public on different matters. Unlike previously held beliefs that only opinion leaders can air their views and be listened to, digital media breaks such barriers, as the people can speak directly to their government. Research findings also reveal that social media provides citizens with the platform that allows free speech—as they can now air their views on matters without fear of physical assault or harassment from any quarters (Madueke et al., 2017). Social media creates platforms for governments and the people to cross-pollinate ideas and eventually meet on common ground where everyone will be better for it.

Influence on political narratives and views among citizens: Findings of a study (Onyebuchi, Abayi & Amadi, 2019) reveal that information shared and debated on new media platforms such as social media influence users' perceptions on certain political issues. When political matters are debated on new media platforms, ideas are shared, perspectives and perceptions are in the open for users to see, and this has a direct impact on their understanding and interpretation of such matters. Therefore, new media influences users' political views and narratives.

New media play a major role in improving civic engagement and creating avenues for direct conversation with representatives. ICTs are used to promote the concept of e-democracy when ICTs are used to promote the concept of democracy that accords all adult citizens of a country the opportunity to have equal participation in "proposal, development, and creation of laws" (Uzochukwu & Ekwughu, 2014, p.210). Uzochukwu and Ekwughu further stress that the role of the new media in this regard is that it helps the citizens with relevant information for them to have efficient political participation. Research finds that civic engagement is also enhanced or improved in the 21st century by means of digital technologies as they serve as platforms where citizens have direct access to have robust communication with their elected representatives (Uzochukwu & Ekwughu, 2014). Amongst all the new media technologies or innovations, the study identified social media as the most relevant in this regard.

Enhanced feedback mechanisms in political communication: A major way to ensure sustained political participation is to enable feedback channels and keep

them open. Social media serve as platforms for collective action through their provision of synchronous and asynchronous interactions (Mustapha, Gbonegun & Mustapha, 2016). Mustapha et al. further explain that social media platforms serve as "two-way communication routes" (p.132), which empowers political actors and organisations to communicate with the citizens whilst the recipients are expected to provide feedback in an instantaneous manner. The study reveals that it is the vast opportunity that social media creates that makes politicians active users of the platforms in modern times.

Creation of new vistas makes political communication is cost-effective and all-encompassing. Traditional media used to be the only alternative to face-to-face political communication, and the space and time provided were limited. The era was also expensive as a lot of money needed to be spent on media space acquisition, with a commensurate waste of resources such as time (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). Citizens who had to perform tasks to earn money could not participate in campaign rallies as they deemed it time-consuming. However, that has changed in modern times as people can keep up with political campaigns and rallies through new media technologies and platforms while they work in the fields, offices, or elsewhere. People or organisations can take advantage of social media platforms to carry out political mobilisation of large groups of people—that may run into millions (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013). Okoro and Nwafor further emphasise that social media are "veritable tools" that are used to interact and also mobilise citizens to participate in the political process regardless of their numbers.

Conclusion

Digital media technology has greatly influenced political communication in the whole world. It has been established (through their analysis of existing research) that the use of digital technologies has revolutionised political communication. Voter mobilisation, sensitisation and education are some of the ways in which the digital media is used in political discourse. Online communication, mobile devices, web applications, and many more are such digital technologies used in the country. Digital technologies have brought about an improvement in citizens' participation in the electoral process. It provides an opportunity for politicians to reach the electorate in ways that are cost-effective. It is important to state that digital technologies through platforms such as social media have liberalised the political communication space to the extent that it is now more participatory and effective. Therefore, political communication relies so much on digital technologies to thrive with regards to scope and reach.

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