

Social Media and Political Participation in Election Campaigns: the Case of Gombe State 2011 General Election

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study was carried out to investigate the use of social media in political participation in election campaigns in Gombe state 2011 general election in Nigeria.

Design/Methodology/Approach: survey research design was adopted for this study. Three objectives and three research questions were formulated to guide the study. A simple random sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 364 respondents. Instruments for data collection included a well-structured questionnaire. Three hundred and sixty four copies of questionnaire were distributed with a return rate of 100%. The study used frequency counts and percentages for data analysis.

Findings: The results revealed that only resources that where as many used the technology to make vital input in the political discourse, others used them to attack opponents, spread false rumours, hate and inciting messages which were believed to have contributed in the violence and tensions witnessed before, during and after the elections in many parts of the country in 2011 general election.

Implication: Suggested solutions to challenges the misuse of social media in political participation which will help a lot in participatory democracy, it will also help in ensuring transparency of the whole process.

Originality/Value: It was recommended that there should be periodic public enlighten on the use of social media and politicians/political parties as well as party supporters should be cautioned on using social media to post false and inciting messages and also effort should be made toward monitoring, moderating or regulating the various social medias in order to minimize the observed weaknesses.

Keywords: Social Media, Political participation, Election campaign

Introduction

In a modern democracy, social media can be used by governments to involve citizens in decision-making, and by civil society to engage people in specific issues. However social media can also be used to broaden political participation by helping citizens to communicate with their representatives and with each other. Arguably, this political communication is most important during election campaigns when political parties and candidates seek to mobilize citizens and persuade them to vote for a given party or candidate.

The 2011 general elections witnessed a remarkable use of social media as a political communication tool in Nigeria. Three major issues underline the tremendous use of social media tools during the 2011 elections. Firstly, the use of social media in Nigeria's 2011 Elections reflects a global trend towards "internet elections" or "e-electioneering"

(Macnamara 2008). Around the world, rapidly expanding access to internet, increased availability of internet, ready smart-phones and other communication devices, as well as the evolution of web-based new media – personal websites, social networking sites, blogs, newsletters, have redefined methods of political communication, leading to a significant shift towards the use of social media in the electoral process. Previously, television network and newspapers dominated coverage of electioneering and were the primary sites of election related information. But today, the social media has become a major election information sharing platform globally. Because of its ease of use, speed, and reach out, social media is revolutionizing the efficiency of election administration, coverage and reporting. The second issue that underline the use of social media in Nigeria's 2011 elections is the

tendency of some Nigerian politicians to tap into the opportunities offered by the social media for on-line campaigning. During the 2011 general elections, many politicians, particularly the presidential aspirants, used social media tools to connect with voters and Constituents. Face book and Twitter appear to be the most widely used social media platforms by the politicians. For example, in December 2010, it was estimated that Goodluck Jonathan had nearly 300,000 fans on his Facebook page (Ekine 2010). Other presidential aspirants like Dele Momodu, Ibrahim Shekarau, NuhuRibadu, AtikuAbubakar, and Ibrahim Babangida, all had Twitter and other social media accounts. Political parties like the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), and Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) also maintained Facebook accounts. Social media offered politicians and their parties the opportunity to broadcast messages and recruit a huge number of volunteers to support their campaign. The third issue that underscores the use of social media in Nigeria's 2011 elections is the tendency of Nigerian civil society and the electorate to take up social media as a tool for improving the efficiency of election observation. Prior to the conduct of the 2011 elections, elections in Nigeria have been largely flawed by vote rigging and other electoral malpractices. The 2003 and 2007 elections were particularly marked by dissatisfaction by candidates, voters and observers. The elections were trailed by complaints of irregularities such as disenfranchisement of prospective voters, snatching of ballot boxes from election officials and stuffing of the boxes with invalid ballot papers, as well as allegations of collusion between election officials and politicians to alter election results and subvert popular mandate (Ibrahim and Ibeanu 2009). The flaws that characterized the conduct of the 2007 elections severely dented the integrity of elections in Nigeria's, and triggered demands for freer, fairer, and more transparent elections.

To address the flaws that marred previous elections in Nigeria, various organizations, Institutions and individuals set up social media platforms that enabled the citizens to oversee

The electoral process reports electoral malpractices to authorities through their mobile Phones, computers and other electronic devices. Through social media platforms, overwhelming

number of videos, photos, tweets and comments were shared. In the words of one analyst, "the widespread use of these real-time media severely limited electoral Malpractices because we found that people were aware that they were on camera and this made them operate at their best behaviour" (Omokri 2011). Attahiru Jega, Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), also agrees that the use of social media during the 2011 elections "enhanced transparency in the electoral process and made INEC more accountable to the public in the conduct of elections" (cited in Amuchie 2012).

The 2011 general elections offer a unique context and opportunity to examine the use of Social media in elections, especially the usefulness and applicability of social media in the electoral environment. Although it seems obvious that social media contributed in no small Measure to the success of the 2011 elections, it is pertinent to understand specifically how Particular stakeholders in the 2011 elections, like INEC, politicians/political parties, the Electorate, and CSOs, used the social media during the elections.

Social Media and political participation

The term 'Social Media' has been defined in different ways by its users, ICT experts, and authors. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of internet-based Applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". It includes web-based and Mobile based technologies that are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among individuals, organizations, and communities. Typical examples of social media Platforms include websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube and the interactive options on these websites, such as the "re-tweeting" option on Twitter. These instruments are referred to as media because they are tools which can also be used for the storage and dissemination of information. However unlike the traditional media e.g. Television and Radio, most of the social media tools allow their users to interact as "re-tweeting" on Twitter and "comment" options on Facebook illustrate.

Looking at social media from a more practical point of view, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008:179)

define social media as a “read-write Web, where the online audience moves beyond Passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content” One thing that is common in most definitions of social media is the point that it is based on user-generated participation. The opportunity to enjoy user-to-user interaction distinguishes social media from the traditional media which is characterized by top-down news dissemination arrangement (Clark and Aufderheide 2009).

In the process of political communication, there has been strong intermediation between the traditional media and the three categories of social media mentioned above. Traditional media channels, particularly television and newspapers, try to expand their reach by using social media platforms for news broadcast. In Nigeria for example, many newspapers like Guardian, Vanguard, Daily Trust, and ThisDay as well as television stations like Channels, have Facebook and Twitter accounts. A common trend among traditional media houses, especially the television stations, is to have i-reporters. I-reporters are individuals without professional experience of journalism, but who can utilize their dexterity in the use of social media tools to broadcast messages about events taking place around them through the traditional media. I-reporters share pictures and videos of events with the public through the television. In this way, the traditional media rely on users of social media for news, information and leads, the same way that social media utilize news and information emanating from newspapers, radio and television channels.

Social media has shaped political communication in four major ways. Firstly, it has deepened segmentation of audience triggered by the rise of network television channels and specialized magazines and websites. Segmentation of audience is a product of two main elements of the social media: diversification of coverage and selective exposure (that is, finding information that aligns with the predispositions of individuals) (Stroud 2008). Social media makes it possible for its users to read and discuss specific issues and then connect with other individuals who share their beliefs. This has the possibility of creating individual voters that are fixated on specific issues and who may not be able to relate with the wider issues that are part of a general election. The existence of different media and brands of

information platform can slit political communication into different segments - all addressing the same issues from different perspectives.

The second way social media has shaped political communication is by weakening the gate keeping capacity of the traditional media. Before the emergence of social media, the traditional media played a key role in deciding what is sufficiently important to be aired to the public. Udejinta (2011) observes that “one remarkable thing about the 2015 general elections was the Adoption of social media especially the face book by the politicians, the political parties and the Electorates as a platform for political participation”. The importance attached to social media in the 2015 general elections was better explained by Olaiya (2015) who revealed that:

With his more than 1,700,000 Facebook followers, Jonathan is the first Nigerian President to use social media to communicate with the citizens. Apart from using the online platform to tell Nigerians some of his achievements while in office, the President has been using the medium to seek the electorate’s support. Every Facebook post of the president attracts thousands of likes and comments from his supporters and the opposition. His party, the PDP, has just a little above 60,000 followers on Facebook and about 28,000 Twitter followers. Likewise, a few days after Buhari was elected to run against Jonathan in next presidential election on the platform of the All Progressives Congress, he too took the campaign for voters’ support to the social media. In just few days after signing up on Twitter, the former head of state has gained over 70,000 followers and also commands about 100,000 followers on Facebook. His party, the APC, with over 75,000 Twitter followers, has tweeted more than 8,000 times – seeking for the electorate’s votes, while some of them are also geared towards “attacking” the PDP. The APC seems to be using the service more frequently than the PDP, which has less than 2,000 tweets. Meanwhile, Buhari has said he would create time to read through the comments and observations of his fans via his Facebook page as he contests against President Jonathan. “I take note of every comment, suggestion and feedback you give me. Please keep them coming. Thank you for your support,” he wrote on Facebook.

With the hue and cry over difficulty getting the Permanent Voter's Card (PVC), it remains to be seen how this online battle will translate to victory for both feuding sides on Saturday, February 14. Whoever carries the day will be hugely indebted to the passion of the teeming mass of both virtual and physical combatants who sacrificed sweat and blood to make it happen.

Statement of Problem

Nigeria had her first true test of social media use for political participation during the 2011 general elections. Many positive results were recorded. For instance, both the local and foreign observers rated the election as the best in the fourteen year history of unbroken democracy in the country. Human Rights Watch report of April 18, 2011 says that although the April elections were heralded as among the fairest in Nigeria's history, they also were among the bloodiest". The reports further show that a total of not less than 800 persons were killed, more than 65,000 others displaced and over 350 places of worships either burnt or destroyed in the violence that precipitated after the announcement of the 2011 general elections results in the northern states of Adamawa, Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Jigawa, Kaduna, Kano, Katsina, Niger, Sokoto, Yobe and Zamfara by rioters. Adeyanju and Haruna (2011) believe that social media played a huge role in instigating and fuelling the violence. They argue that during the period, many Facebook pages were awash with false rumours and gossips that added to hitting up the polity and creating unnecessary tensions. The GSM short message service (SMS) was used to spread false election results that differ from what INEC eventually announced. This made electorates believe that their votes did not count and that they were massively rigged.

The researchers believe that if a study of this nature is ignored, the lapses of the first experiment would reoccur in the forth coming 2011 general elections, resulting in another set of election related violence.

Objectives of the study

The general objective of this study is to assess the use of social media for political participation in Gombe during the 2011 general elections. Specifically, the study was meant to:

1. Determine the role social media played in the political participation during the 2011 General Elections.
2. Discover the lapses in the use of social media for political participation in Gombe during the 2011 General Elections.
3. Identify the lessons from social media use for political participation during the 2011 General Elections in Gombe.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions.

1. What role did social media play in the political participation of during the 2011 general elections?
2. What lapses were observed in the use of social media for political participation in Gombe during the 2011 general elections?
3. What lessons could be learnt from social media use for political participation during the 2011 general elections in Gombe?

The Research Methodology

The study used survey research design. Surveys allow for the study of people's opinion on a given issue of public interest. According to Onwukwe (2011), "survey research is concerned with the collection of data for the purpose of describing and interpreting a certain condition, Practice, beliefs, attitudes, etc." The purpose is usually to describe systematically the facts, Qualities or characteristics of a given population, events, or areas of interest concerning the Problem under investigation

The Research Population

This study focused on Gombe youths. Our choice of the youths as the focus population is because they constitute the active users of the various social media platforms. The Nigeria National Youth Policy (2001) defines youths as "all young people between the ages of 18 and 35 years who are citizens of the Federal Republic of Nigeria". Based on this definition the researchers selected Gombe State University Students Population in conducting this study for the fact that it is one of the Institutions in the Metropolis that has a higher concentration of Youths population. This is because to use social media, one requires some certain degree of literacy, and

majority of the youths in the capital cities can boast of this. Again, social media is heavily dependent on electricity, and the capital city has electricity, though epileptic.

The Sample size

The sample size for this study was 364. This was determined using the sample size determination table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) population of over 7000 would have a sample size of 364.

The Sampling Technique

Sampling works on the premise that a given population is too large for any researcher to realistically observe all the elements therein (Best and Khan, 2007). This was the case in this study as studying all the users of social media in Gombe State during the 2015 general elections

was practically impossible. Hence, selection of samples became necessary. In doing so, we chose the simple random sampling technique.

Instrument for Data Collection

Questionnaire was the only instrument used in conducting this study. The questionnaire was in two parts comprising of 8 questions. The first part (questions 1-3) was on the demographic variables of the respondents, while the second part (questions 4-8) was on respondents' exposition to the issue of study and the possibility to answer the research questions earlier posed.

Data presentation and analysis: Data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics where frequencies and percentage were used.

Table 1: Sex Distribution of Respondents.

S/N	Variables	Frequency %
1	Male	249 (68%)
2	Female	115 (32%)
	Total	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

Table one above show the sex distribution of respondents which clearly indicated that males

are the majority with 249 representing 68% of the total respondents.

Table 2: Age Categories of Respondents.

S/N	Variable	Frequency %
1	18-23	165 (45.32%)
2	24-29	120 (32.97%)
3	30-35	79 (21.70%)
	Total	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

Table 2 shows that respondents between the age bracket of 18-23 dominated the study in the various levels. Their average percentage was 45%. Those between ages 24-29

amounted anAverage of 33%, while those between (30-35) constituted an average of 22%.

Table 3: Marital Status of Respondents

S/N	Variable	Frequency %
1	Single	285 (78.29%)
2	Married	79 (21.70%)
	Total	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

Table 3 shows that the number of unmarried students' youths outnumbers their married

counterpart with an average figure of 78% and married 22%.

Table 4: Ascertaining whether respondents know what social media are

S/N	Variables	Frequency %
1	I Know	306 (84.06%)
2	I don't know	48 (13.18%)
3	No Comment	11 (3.02%)
	Total	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

Table 4 shows that an average of 84% of the total respondents studied know what Social

media are while 13% do not know and 3% did not respond to the question.

Table 5: Whether Respondents had Account with any of the Social Media Platform during the 2015 General Elections.

S/N	Variables	Frequency %
1	I did	221 (60.71%)
2	I did not	138 (37.36%)
3	No Comment	7 (1.92%)
	Total	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

Table 5above shows that during the 2015 general elections, an average of 61% of the total respondents had accounts with one social

media platform or the other while an average of 37% did not have and 1.9% did not respond to the question.

Table 6: Whether Respondents Used Social Media for Political Participation during the 2015 General Election.

S/N	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY/%
1	Yes I did	204 (56.04%)
2	No I did not	117 (32.14%)
3	No Comment	43 (11.81%)
	TOTAL	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

From the statistics as presented in table 6 above shows that an average of 56% of all respondents used social media for political

participation during the 2011 general elections while 32% did not. Also, 12 % of the respondents declined response to this question.

Table 7: List of social media platforms respondents used

S/N	VARIABLES	FREQUENCY/ %
1	Face book	217 (59.62%)
2	Twitter	7 (1.92%)
3	Skype	5 (1.37%)
4	WhatsApp	79 (21.70%)
5	You Tube	9 (2.47%)
6	Google+	3 (0.82%)
7	BBM	39 (10.71%)
8	Others	5 (1.37%)
	Total	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

Table 7 above indicates that Facebook is the most used social media platform during the period under review. It was followed by WhatsApp, Twitter, Blackberry Messenger (BBM) YouTube, and others.

Table 8: Lessons from Social Media Use during the 2015 General Elections.

S/N	STATEMENT	FREQUENCY %
1.	Promote transparency in the electoral process	95 (26.10%)
2.	Facilitates speedy release of election Results at all levels	106 (29.12%)
3.	Offer participatory democracy	20 (5.49%)
4	Used to spread false	29 (7.97%)
5	Spread of inciting messages and Manipulation of images	109 (29.96%)
6	Used to attack opponents	5 (1.37%)
	TOTAL	364 (100%)

Source: Field Survey, December, 2015

Table 8 above indicates the lessons learned from the use of social media in 2015 general election,

where the variable: Spread of inciting messages and manipulation of images has the highest

frequency of 109 representing 29.96% of the total respondents. While the variable: Used to attack opponents has the lowest frequency of 5 representing only 1.37% of the total respondents.

Conclusion

This study has shown that social media was used for political participation in Gombe state during the 2011 general elections. It however shows that, very large number of people used the technology wisely to campaign for their various candidates, interact with candidates and electorates one-on-one, report happenings in their constituencies during the elections and electioneering period, share personal views and public opinions on the various candidates; as part of its lapses some people used this medium to attack opponents, spread false rumours, hate and inciting messages, digitally manipulate images, messages and videos. Also from this study it was revealed that social media helps a lot in participatory democracy, it also help in ensuring transparency of the whole process.

Recommendations

From the findings, the researcher has the following recommendations:

1. Periodic public enlightenment on the use of social media platforms for political purpose especially among the youths, more especially by the government, NGOs, and other online social groups, among others.
2. Politicians and political parties, as well as party supporters should be cautioned on using social Media to post false and implicative messages. It is therefore recommended that, Government or any other authority concerned may consider enacting laws against this.
3. Efforts should be made towards monitoring, moderating or regulating the various social media Platforms in order to minimize the observed weaknesses.

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