

Social Media and the Mobilization of Youths for Socio-Political Participation

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Abstract

This study was carried out to examine the effects that the social media is exerting on the participation of Nigerian youths in socio-political issues. This is against the backdrop of long standing exclusion of youths from issues affecting the polity and governance. The study was conducted using the survey method with questionnaires administered to selected respondents. The results showed that large numbers of youths are spending time online, and by participating in social media discussions on socio-political matters affecting the country. They are thus getting informed and raising awareness about different issues through e-publicity and demonstrations, thereby promoting good governance in different ways, like accountability. The study recommends that there should be improved media literacy on the part of avid social media users and activists, in order to make the best use of the innovation for socio-political participation and reduce incidences of false or, malicious information going viral and affecting the society negatively.

Keywords: social media, political participation, governance, youths

‘Information is power’. This is a very popular, almost cliché statement. But it still rings true every time. Access to information enables people to be aware of events, learn new ways of solving their problems, surveying the environment, and getting involved with happenings around them. Information also helps people make decisions about issues, based on the facts that are available to them. All these attest to the importance of information in the lives of people all over the world, and all through the ages.

Access to information through the mass media has become a very intrinsic part of societies. The mass media is saddled with the responsibility of collating information, digging for facts, making sense of events and transmitting this information to a mass audience. Generally this is done through either the print or electronic media or broadcast media.

Mass communication media practice has over the years being influenced and shaped by the existing technology for communication. From the days of face to face interpersonal communication, town criers, non-verbal signals, handwritten text, early mechanical printing press, radio, television, to contemporary, digital, satellite and internet technology, the way communication is practiced and the influence it has, to a large extent, is determined by the technology available to media practitioners. This fact gave rise to the formulation of communication models and theories hinged on technology such as the Shannon-Weaver model and the technological determinism theories of Marshall McLuhan.

Kulus (2011) as quoted in Okoro (2013, p.31) notes about the following about new technologies in communication:

The value of the communication experience has undergone a sea-change; from the need to share it, to the need to share in it. Technology and social media in particular have brought power back to the people; with such technologies, established authorities are now undermined and users are now the experts.

As digital media have become increasingly ubiquitous, there are increasing concerns over how, and to what social and political ends, youth engage with media. Rheingold, (2008) as quoted in Hauge (2013) notes that there is particular interest in understanding how participation in mediated environments online fosters civic engagement, knowledge, and civic participation. This work attempts to investigate the trends concerning participation in digital environments, in order to consider the implications for youths to practice citizenship through internet and social media literacy, and how participation in media spaces is negotiated by youth in relation to political practices and its subsequent consequences.

Statement of the Problem

For a long time, due to many factors, including the ‘hegemonic’ nature of communication in Nigeria, youths had little opportunity to be active in governance, or make their views heard. However, with improvement in communication technology, the status quo appears to be changed. Internet tools like the Social media have revolutionised the way people communicate. In Nigeria, youths, who have higher levels of affinity with the social media, are using it to achieve different ends. It holds lots of potential for news, information, entertainment,

mobilisation, interaction and expression.

Given these potentials, it is pertinent to find out how the social media impacts the issue of governance and political participation by youths. Some studies have been carried, most focusing on events such as protests. It is however pertinent to examine how the leadership and the political atmosphere has been changed, with relation to youths access to social media. This forms the crux of the study.

Objectives

- To examine how youths participate in social media discussions on issues relating to governance in Nigeria.
- To find out how interactions on the social media is affecting real life decisions and attitudes of both youth and leaders in different sectors of the society.
- To assess the extent to which social media activities are changing the outlook of socio-political activities in Nigeria.
- To know the extent to which youths see the social media as a tool for participating directly or indirectly in governance.

Research Questions

- Do social media give youths opportunity to express themselves freely about national issues?
- Do social media interactions can help youths have a better grasp of happenings around them and influence their actions or decisions?
- Do youths see online media as a viable avenue to participate in governance and socio-political issues?
- Is the social media a feasible tool for bringing about change in the society?

Literature Review

Good governance has been a key concept for democratic development in many countries around the world during the past few decades. The explanations of good governance can be varied. One of these, which is widely accepted, focuses on the capability of the state to perform its key functions in response to the needs of its citizens, and to be accountable for what it does. Emphasis has therefore been placed on a people-centred ideology - needs of the people, public interest, transparency, accountability and responsibility of the policy-makers. All these have also become central to establishing sustainable development.

Youths can play an important part in every society. They can be a creative force, a dynamic source of innovations, and they have undoubtedly, throughout history, participated, contributed, and even catalyzed important changes in political systems, power-sharing dynamics and economic opportunities.

Titus Fannie, Akpan & Moses (2013) however identify some contrary issues in relation to social media's positive influence on governance. These are two arguments against the idea that social media can make a difference in the national politics of a state. "The first is the fact that the tools themselves are actually ineffective, and second, that these tools can produce as much harm to any process of democratization as they can produce good". The critique that social media can be ineffective stems from the fact that casual participants to activities and actions such as large-scale social protests seek social change through low-cost activities such as joining a particular Facebook group, 'hash tagging' a trending statement e.g. #bringbackourgirls on Twitter or commenting on forums. Some researchers are of the opinion that such actions cannot bring about any useful action.

Social Media and Governance

Communication is an important factor in any political dispensation. Media messages go a long way in oiling the wheels of the governance protest. This may be either for good or for bad, such as the infamous Adolf Hitler propaganda.

In a bid to galvanise the government towards positive action, people have now turned to the innovation of the social media. Olley & Ekharrafo (2013, p.30) assert that "social media have become the engine of social movements in the world today". They add that social media have begun to take on a new meaning in democracy by providing a collective voice that now assists the masses in documenting their struggle for change and a better society.

In Nigeria, the impact of social media has been felt on a couple of issues. One that readily resonates is that of the anti-fuel subsidy protests of January, 2012. During this period, Nigerians, especially the youths, came out to the streets en-mass in the Occupy Nigeria protest. What however stood out was the magnitude of online activity that was going before the street protest, and is even believed to have generated the Occupy Nigeria movement. Twitter, Facebook, Nairaland, YouTube and LIB were beehives of activism, where people shared information about the subsidy removal, the ongoing budget discussions, as well as the progress of the street protests. Additionally, creatively crafted statements were used in expressing feelings about the subsidy debacle,

galvanising more action from the protesters. The relative anonymity that can be granted by the social media spurred young Nigerians to speak without fear, and express their feelings about the subsidy removal as seen below:

“Day 4: The struggle continues... Bloodshed, arson, hunger, tears, pain, darkness, cries of protest, rain of curses, gloom, uncertainty...in the prime of our lives? And the government won't shift grounds? Hmmmmm”

“If we had a few basic amenities like the almighty electricity, then at least we can moan and complain under the comfort of our ceiling fans and air conditioner. But oh no! That is asking for too much.”

“...Please wake up and lets get these power junkies out of power!!! Let the revolution begin, crude oil and petroleum is our common patrimony. They have no right to punish Nigerians over our commonwealth.”

Apart from organising protests, the social media has been used to also hasten the speed of activities relating to governance in different spheres. For instance, on 17th of April, 2014, there was a case of crisis in Wukari of Taraba state, with people getting injured and killed. Internet users quickly uploaded the information on Twitter, calling on the Police to come to the community's aid. Shortly afterwards, the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) responded via Twitter that officers had been deployed, and the issue addressed.

Additionally, a Police officer who brutalised two women in Lagos was filmed by a bystander and the video uploaded on YouTube. It generated a lot of traffic, and led to the NPF having to hurriedly trace the erring officer and bring him to book.

These examples only go to highlight the different ways by which young internet users in Nigeria are harnessing the social media to solve problems.

Some scholars, such as noted in Olley & Ekharrafo (2013), however say that most youths who are active on socio-political issues online are those who have always had interest in politics, even before the social media. This may explain why many people can contribute on online protests, but only very few of them will come out to take the streets.

Hegemonic Communication

Hegemonic communication refers to a system of communication within a society whereby the means, technologies, messages and personnel of communication are heavily controlled by those in power for their own usually selfish and partisan reasons. In hegemonic communication, the senders of the message are mostly members of the elite or leadership class. Here, communication is wrought along elite lines.

Udejah, (2014), in writing about hegemonic communication, noted that:

In Nigeria the political system inherited the tradition of secrecy and privilege where although the press was not altogether muzzled, most newspapers' political writing and pamphleteering did not report information about what politics was, so much as express opinions about what it should be. A significant substance of hegemonic communication is based on assumptions about media consumers that are fundamentally erroneous. These false assumptions are expensive; they prevent people from utilising the talents, abilities, and motivations that reside within the media consuming public. Control of the media became a central issue informed by the realisation that communications technologies are likely to serve the interests of those who control and use them.

Udejah (2014) goes on to add that in hegemonic communication, it is usually the elite that talk to each other, and when they talk to the masses, it is from the formers' perspectives. This is the ugly dimension of hegemonic communication.

However with the advent of social media, Olley & Ekharrafo (2013, p.30) note that the media have been placed in the hands of anyone who desires them. Gone are the days when the most powerful in the society control the media and by extension, the people. This has tolled the death knell of Nigeria's heritage of hegemonic communication.

Youths and the New Media

The emergence of social media has contributed immensely to expand the limits of good governance. From open government data, and citizens reporting on government abuses, it has also provided a medium to connect citizens with one another and empower them to hold government accountable. Ehidiemen (2013) says social media has a crucial role to play in ensuring Nigerian leaders are held accountable.

The technology of social media is relatively cheap, and it has made it very relatively easy to access and disseminate important information. Social media has also helped activists organize. And Governments have used its emergence to monitor protest and public opinion on its policies. Citizens now quickly report crime to the law enforcement agencies. With the advent of social media, web developers and tech savvy youths have developed several web and mobile applications to propagate the information and make their findings public knowledge.

The beginning of the use of social media actively in socio-political issues or governance is usually pegged at the 2011 general elections, when there were many strategies taken by both politicians and the mostly

young electorate to harness the social media for campaign and information purposes. Nigerian politicians actively utilized social media in their campaigns. They sent bulk text and voice messages in unprecedented numbers. They made massive use of Facebook pages and other social media platforms to win support and canvass for votes. President Jonathan declared his intention to run for the presidency with an update on Facebook. In less than twenty days, he accumulated over 100,000 fans. Today, his page has grown to become the second most “liked” head of states in the world after US President Barack Obama.

However, those who really took the social media by storm in Nigeria during that time were the youths. Young, IT-savvy internet users congregated online to fully discuss, investigate, inform and share ideas about the issues and personalities concerning the elections, the electoral process and the voting day proper. Organisations like *Nairaland*, *Enough is Enough Nigeria*, *ReclaimNaija*, and *Wangonet* established platforms enabling citizens to report election-related incidences with pictures, videos, text messages and voicemail. Agboola (2013) adds that the police, who are sometimes complicit in election malpractice, would have had to be on the watch out as any brutality or unfair play would be reported on the social media. At the same time, traditional media houses also used new media to disseminate information and gather feedback from viewers.

Again, during the January 2012 Fuel subsidy protest in Nigeria, *YourBudget.com* played an instrumental role in ensuring a re-adjustment in the Nigerian budget. The team created a budget cut application during the Occupy Nigeria Movement, a protest instigated by the heavy increment in fuel price. The application helped start an engagement on national budget among users, improving understanding of budget issues. Some of the information released by *BudgIT* went viral. The most prominent example was an analysis of the Nigerian budget, which showed the President was allocated one billion naira for food allowance. Young Nigerians shared the information on different social networks, and it became a hot topic for discussion not just on social media, but on the mainstream traditional media in Nigeria as well.

Current Trends in E-Participation

Many social media sites are being used by youths to participate in governance, make their voices heard and bring their leaders to order. They include foreign/international media applications and platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. There are also the indigenous platforms, made by Nigerians for Nigeria that have become very popular among Nigerians at home and in the diaspora. These are *Nairaland*, *ReclaimNaija*, *BudgIT*, *Bella Naija*, *LIB* etc. With access to internet getting cheaper, more youths are spending substantial time on the internet on a daily basis. Inevitably, they come across social media posts that relate to governance and socio-political issues, and may get involved in the discussion. This marks the beginning of their participation.

In the last few months, issues of insecurity and terrorism have beleaguered the nation. For many young Nigerians, the social media remains a popular source of not just information about updates, but also place to hear assessments and make sense of the situation together with other users. When about 200 girls were kidnapped from Chibok in Borno state, the issue appeared to be losing publicity without the girls being found, until an internet campaign sprung with a classic social media strategy, the ‘hashtag’ represented with ‘#’. The *#bringbackourgirls* campaign has almost become a household phrase now, with people lending their voices from different parts of the world. It began with just some young Nigerian Twitter users, who were determined that the gravity of the situation was not underemphasised, and sought to raise support for the missing girls through the social media.

Also, the 2014 National Dialogue has witnessed a deluge of contributions from internet users. These are predominantly young Nigerians, keen on being aware and involved in national issues. Platforms for discussion have been created on different social media, to inform, aggregate, suggest, rationalise and deliberated on what is happening in the Dialogue. These include *Nairaland’s* National Dialogue Thread, the *#nigerianationaldialogue* on twitter, www.nigeriannationaldialogue.com and the conference’s Facebook page which currently has over 104,000 likes on Facebook and many more unregistered visitors.

Theoretical Base

The study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications theory. This theory was propounded by Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1974). The theory is concerned with what people do with media instead of what media do to people. The assumption is that people influence the effects media have on them. The Uses and Gratifications theory assumes that members of the audience are not passive but play active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. Asemah (2011), notes that the theory emphasizes motives and the self perceived needs of audience members. Thus, in applying this theory to this study, it is reasoned that internet users deliberately choose the social media to serve their need for involvement and awareness about governance issues in the country. The utility they need here is a level of participation in government, and the social media is employed by them specially to gratify that need.

Methodology

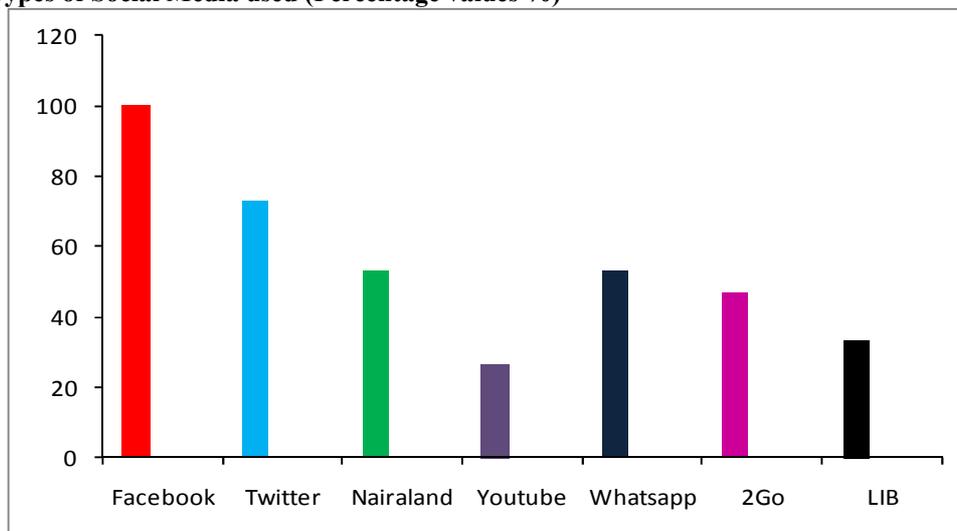
The research methodology applied here is the Survey. This involves the sampling of opinions of a selected number of youths who use the internet. The instrument for data collection is the questionnaire. This kind of approach is adopted because in measuring youth involvement in governance through social media, it will be necessary to hear from them how they see social media and its effects on their ability to take part in governance. Also, the youths surveyed can give an insight into how they think this participation can improve the society. The questionnaire will be analysed using tables and simple percentage values.

For the sampling size, purposive sampling method was used. Criteria considered for this study include being a youth, and having access to internet and social media tools.

The population of study is students in the Social Science faculty of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. One hundred formed the sample size. Copies of the questionnaire were thus shared to those who meet the purposive sampling criteria, and ninety were returned. These were analysed for the study.

Findings

Chart 1: Types of Social Media used (Percentage values %)



This bar chart represents the types of social media commonly used by respondents. 100% of the respondents use Facebook, while Twitter is used by 73%, and Nairaland is used by 53.3% of the respondents. Youtube has 26.7%, 2Go 46.7% and LIB 33.3%. Some respondents used more than one social media search.

Table 1: Degree of connection to social media:

Degree	Frequency	Percentage
Always connected	18	20%
Often	30	33.33%
Moderate	30	33.33%
Rarely	12	13.33%
Total	90	100%

Table 2: Have you ever participated in an online campaign

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	66	73.3%
No	24	26.7%
Total	90	100

Table 3: Participation in street protest/demonstration with online support

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	24	26.7%
No	66	73.3%
Total	90	100%

Table 4: Actions/Decisions Influenced by Social media Interactions

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	54	60%
Not really	30	33.3%
No	6	6.7%
Total	90	100%

Table 5: Are e-protests against bad leadership beneficial

Response	Frequency	Total
Yes	60	66.7%
No	30	33.3%
Total	90	100%

Table 6: Does social media help youths participate in governance

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	36	53.3%
Agree	48	60%
Disagree	6	6.7%
Total	90	100%

Discussion of Findings

The data presented above provides some insight into the subject matter of social media and youths participation in governance. The study was set out to find answers to four research questions.

The first research question asks if the social media gives youths the opportunity to express themselves freely on issues of governance or national importance. Table 2 presented above shows that 73.3% of youths agreed to have participated in online campaigns concerning national issues in different ways. This is against only 33.7% who answered in the negative. This indicates that a high number of people are interested in issues of governance and normally try to contribute online.

The second research question asks if social media interactions can help youths have a better grasp of happenings around them and influence their actions or decisions. Table 4 contributes in answering this question. 64% of the respondents answered yes. This is more than half of the total respondents. Meanwhile 33.3% said they were not really influenced, but this still gives room for some level of impact as per social media and youth participation in governance. Only 6.7% said it had no influence on them. Also, question 15 on the questionnaire, which is close-ended, has a selection of important issues that the social media helped youths understand. Answers range from the removal of fuel subsidy, insecurity, ASUU strike, corruption and election matters. The most frequently mentioned issue however is that of insecurity. It came indifferent ways- Boko Haram, insecurity, abduction of Chibok girls, Nyanya blast and ethno-religious crisis. This happens to be the most prevalent issue in the country at the moment, and many youths are getting information, discussion and making suggestions online.

The third research question asks if youths see the online media as a viable form of participating in governance and socio-political issues. Table 6 answers this question, where 53.3% of respondents strongly agree that the social media presents a good avenue for them. 60% said they agree, while only 6.7% said they disagree. Reasons given by respondents who agree include the ability of youths to be innovative in online communication, the ease with which information can be passed online about national issues, and the relatively cheapness of using social media rather than purchasing newspapers. Another respondent noted that by posting or commenting online, leaders can get to read these posts, and probably act accordingly. This shows that the youths not only believe in the power of social media, but they are deliberately trying to be involved in national issues through social media. This conforms to the Uses and Gratification theory, where it is stated that people use the media to fulfil specific needs or desires.

The fourth research question seeks to know if the social media can be a feasible tool for bringing about change in the society. Table 5 helps answer this question. 66.7% of the respondents answered in the affirmative, that is, social media can help improve governance in the country.

The consequence of these findings is that the social media has changed the landscape of citizenship and leadership, mass mobilization, governance and politics, and the way people can hold their leaders accountable. This conforms to Olley and Ekharrafo's (2013, p.46) assertion that 'Nigerian government and political office holders must be conscious of the capacity of the people to galvanise themselves into action using social media tools'. Youths, who engage actively in social media, have moved from the level of just entertainment and interaction with family and friends, to that of involving actively in issues relation to politics, governance, leadership, corruption and security. The social media's inherent potentials provide for great freedom of

expression, submission of ideas, surveillance of the political/governance sphere to identify those who are being involved in negative acts, and through public outcry, expose them. Many times, outcry against public office holders has led to such cases being investigated and offenders sanctioned in different ways.

Another important finding from this research is the fact that though many people can get involved online in socio-political issues, it is only a fraction that may actually go on to get involved in live demonstrations or activities. However, that does not change the fact that the internet remains a powerful tool for political participation.

This potential to participate in societal issues through the social media, of course, may only be applicable to those who have access to communication facilities. That is, the issue of digital divide still exists, and youths in the rural areas may still be passing through situations that the social media may have no impact on because they lack the access and empowerment.

Conclusion

Due to the information explosion in the digital age, the importance and impact of information on the platform of the internet cannot be overemphasized. This is more so with a tool like the social media. The platform of social media opens up people, especially youths who are the most active users, to the issues around them. This affords them the opportunity to talk, make their voices heard usually through sustained public outcry as witnessed during the 2014 #bringbackourgirls and the 2012 Occupy Nigeria movement.

Additionally, the widespread attraction for the social media may be attributed to the fact that this is the only place where the common man and youths can make their voices heard since the mainstream media may not be predisposed to granting audience to divergent ideas from youths or other people not specially recognised as opinion leaders. This can be exemplified by one of the responses, that 'it (social media) gives them an avenue to air out their views through their online posts and often times these posts get to their leaders'.

Recommendations

The social media should be recognised as a veritable tool for aggregating public opinion by public office holders, and should encourage free expression therein, and let such views guide their activities.

Youths should not limit their activities to online media, but try to take these movements to the streets, offices and get involved more in offline activities. The percentage of offline activists is very low compared to the high number of online activists.

Given the ability of information to travel very fast and go viral online, social media users and advocates should be careful the information they share so that they do not cause chaos when wrong information or rumours are uploaded.

The potentials of the social media renew the need for media literacy. People, both leaders and citizens, need to adopt or have appreciable levels of internet skills, in order to benefit from it, and avoid the consequences that may arise from ignorance.

Further Research

Given the ever changing nature of internet communication, it is necessary to conduct more research in this area to find out how it affects the dynamics of the society in different ways. In relation to youth mobilization and socio-political issues, there is still need to see how more people can be made to move their campaigns from the internet, and on to the streets.

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