

# A Sociological Investigation into the Influence of the New Media on Political Mobilization: A Study of Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election

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## Abstract

The new social media have adopted a new form of political mobilization, democracy and government which have become an effective voice for many. As a result of this new social phenomenon which has a large audience communicating with each other. Modern political parties have shifted their ground to the social media platform to create political awareness and using it as a campaign ground, a platform for raising funds for a political party and political debates in order to woo/mobilize electorates. Therefore, this paper examines the impact of the new media on political mobilization using a qualitative content analysis of some news, journals, print and electronic media message. The paper presents a situation analysis and reveals that new social media cannot be down play by politicians when it comes to the area of political mobilization because of its large audience which is about 11.2 million Nigerians. It shows that the new media have enhanced political awareness and interaction. However, politicians/political parties in Nigeria have made use of this new social media to marginalize, intimidate, and discredit political opponents which have led to verbal war/political conflicts. The paper suggests that social media providers should discourage its users from posting provocative and hate messages by blocking such messages.

**Keywords:** social media, political mobilization, presidential election

## 1. Introduction

Social media are computer-mediated tools that allow people to create, share or exchange information, career interests, ideas, and pictures/videos in virtual and networks. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) defined 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. Social media refers to the phenomenon of a large audience communicating with each other. Primary social media includes; television, magazine, newspapers, networking, websites like facebook and twitter (which are phone based application tools). These are used to share information among people and have become part of human life in place where they exist.

According to Adedeji (2015), Social media have acquired new forms of democracy, government and have become a clear more effective voice of many, and also have influence on all spheres of human life. The influence of social media on political mobilization was felt more in the Nigeria general election during the electioneering process, from parties primaries, to campaigns to the polling units (voting process), through the counting of the election result by Nigeria independent electoral commission (INEC).

Social media has made politics more modern and as such demand that the new media serve as a platform through which political parties and politicians contest for election positions, whereby the decision to vote any credible candidate depends on the level of political awareness of a people at a given time. In 2015, presidential election according to American Aljazeera, users of social media rose to about 11.2million; as a result of this, INEC had to train 10,000 staff to check the excess of political parties on social media. The birth of new media platforms provides further avenues and knowledge sharing, and inclusion and empowerment. The new media can play a vital watch dog role, and serve as a campaign platform for mobilizing electorate, a forum for public debate and as a public educator, ultimately strengthening democracy. It is therefore, the aim of this paper to examine the influence of social media on political mobilization in Nigeria general election of 2015.

## 2. Nature and meaning of new social media

Social media is 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. Furthermore, social media depends on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content.

Social media plays a vital role in changing the way we think, feel, and view happening around us and how we consume our news, with events being reported as they're happening. According Suomen (2012), social media are new information network and information technology using a form of interactive communication

skills, where users produce the content of information and interpersonal relationships are established and maintained in the process. It is a form of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and micro blogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos).

Social media is the collective of online communications channels dedicated to community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration. Websites and applications dedicated to forums, micro blogging, social networking, social bookmarking, social creation, and wikis are among the different types of social media. Social Media is the future of communication, a countless array of internet based tools and platforms that increase and enhance the sharing of information. This new form of media makes the transfer of text, photos, audio, video, and information in general increasingly fluid among internet users. Social Media has relevance not only for regular internet users, but for politicking as well. Platforms like twitter and Facebook have created online communities where people can share as much or as little personal information as they desire with other members. The result is an enormous amount of information that can be easily shared, searched, promoted, disputed, and created.

In so many cases on social media, what started out as rumours, gossip, or even speculation that are reproduced and rebroadcasted as real, even though it was fake ab-initio. This particular problem emanates from the user-to-user interaction found on social media and distinguishes from the traditional media. In social media, the gate keeping role of traditional media is eliminated.

There are 5 major features that are associated with social media. According to Suomen (2012), the features are social networking and social interaction, participation, the use of social providers, openness, and collaboration. These features are linked to the six classifications of social media postulated by the same author. The social media is a body of packages that users would find attractive and even hard to do without because it has become almost an inseparable part of human life in places where they exist.

### **3. Social media and election mobilization**

Political mobilization can be defined as a process by which candidates, political parties, and supporters or party faithfuls induce other people to participate in politics in order to win elections. Mobilization is a key prerequisite before any participation can occur. Political mobilization can further be defined as the way in which citizens organize people to put pressure on the political representatives (Michael and Olanrewaju, 2011).

Mobilization could be seen as the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate in politics to win elections, to pass bills, and to influence policies (Strandberg 2006). Marc, et al (2010) asserts that mobilization is an important precondition for most forms of political participation and engagement. Potential participants have to be informed and recruited before they can participate. In fact, mobilization and recruitment processes are essential preconditions before citizens can become engaged in any form of civic or electioneering action. In recent years, these mobilization processes have been transformed rapidly from direct to an indirect process (Michael and Olanrewaju, 2011). Instead of relying on face-to-face contacts or print media, mobilization agents increasingly have adopted new electronic media and the internet to reach out to potential participants. Katerina (2010) distinguishes between the direct and indirect types of mobilization. Direct mobilization includes canvassing on the streets, TV campaigning, direct mails and phone calls. Indirect mobilization takes place through social networks which individuals are subscribed to. Citizens are indirectly mobilized by their family members, playmates from their football team or in the church or mosques they belong to. Involvement in social networks implies that a particular person is available and that he or she is reachable for the request for participation. Indirect mobilization occurs when political leaders contact citizens through social media/networks of friends, neighbors and colleagues. Social networks in this account are a facilitator of political mobilization (Michael and Olanrewaju, 2011).

Political parties and politicians have had to change their system of mobilizing electorates from the old traditional order of mass media (television, newspaper etc) to a new paradigm shift which is the new social media to woo voters. According to Friedman (2007), today's social media has made the world a "global village", with the quick transfer of information overriding the challenges of time and distance (Friedman, 2007). Social media's has gradually become one of the important means of influencing the society and this influence is based exclusively on its social aspects of interaction and participation. As social media gains more popularity and scope, its impact on voters' political and cultural perceptions cannot be underestimated as social media practically influences the way users interact, communicate and make decisions on social, cultural, and political issues in today's world. Voting behaviour is a form of political behavior exhibited by electorates which can be influenced by a lot of factors ranging from emotional, ethnicity, and religion leading them to make certain decisions. However, key external factors may also influence a voter's behaviour such as political socialization, socio-cultural views, tolerance of diverse political views and the media, internet inclusive.

The effect of these influences on voting behavior is dependent on attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and the source of available information to the voter. According to Skyler's (2015) report, over 11.2 million facebook

social network users in Nigeria which is about 6 percent of the population use social media. This made it a necessary battle ground for political parties and politicians to take their campaign online. As evidenced by the March 28th 2015 Presidential elections in Nigeria, political parties, including the two prominent parties took to social media platforms such as online networking sites, blogs, mobile newspapers, news ads, to mention but a few. To campaign and mobilize not only youths but all class of internet users to vote for them. This brought about a variety of interesting news and drama online providing opportunity for users to read, respond, interact, argue and trash out issues online. Twitter, facebook, blogs, online newspapers etc. became platforms for people to air their thoughts on various candidates, and sway others towards their line of thinking with various debates, hashtags and online campaigns. This brought all Nigerians together irrespective of political divide, ethnicity and religion on national issues. Nearly every political party in the country used social media to campaign and advance its plans, message and manifestoes to supporters including advertising, mobilization and organizing in all the states of the federation, and even fundraising.

#### **4. Impact of new social media on election result**

The use of new social media in politics has continued to grow in many parts of Africa. The role of social media networks such as mobile phones' SMS, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube in deepening the democratization of Nigeria in recent times cannot be overemphasized. For example, 2011 alone witnessed a massive use of mobile phones' SMS, Facebook, and Twitter in the general elections in Nigeria. The social media networks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are amongst the most visited websites in Nigeria. Due to their participatory, interactive and cost-effective nature, they have become veritable instruments for carrying out election campaigns and other electioneering activities, political engagement and mobilization among others (Ajayi and Adesote, 2015).

Elections may not be won on social media but perceptions are shaped there. More often than not, these perceptions even influence and shape the mind of the social media users which are over 11.2 million Nigerians on the choices of their candidate. For example social networks like Facebook twitter and YouTube an online poll was held in anticipation of the forthcoming elections, media houses have come up with online presidential polls. Three of these polls have been more popular and they were held by Sahara Reporters, President Jonathan's social media aide, Reno Omokri and AIT. The result showed that out of 15,435 online opinion voters 21% which represent 3,189 voted for Goodluck Jonathan while 79% which represent 12,246 votes, voted for Muhammadu Buhari (Lulu, 2015). However, these online polls have been marked by controversies as there has been accusations of double voting and biased umpires. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that all parties involved don't want to look like they are falling behind in the digital popularity race.

#### **5. Funding**

The life wire of any political party is how well funded they are because fund determines the strength of a political party and its candidate and how far they can go before and during the election processes. One of the political parties, All Progressive Congress (APC), has sought to crowd source funds for their campaign. The party has employed means ranging from ringtones, premium SMS, scratch cards and e-transactions to get supporters to contribute financially. The Nigerian Communications Commission later banned the APC's mobile crowd funding short code, but this decision was struck out by a federal high court sitting in Lagos. The court also ruled that the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the telcom involved should pay ₦500 million (\$2.5 million) in damages to the party.

Gbosa Technology Ltd recently launched a broad-based fundraising platform, SpeaksForUS, to help organizations with crowd-sourced fundraising. The website has a category for political donations where you can make donations by buying political posters, bags and other party branded items, with prices ranging between ₦48 (\$0.25) to ₦10,000 (\$50) naira. This led the party to gain more ground and as such were able to get more sympathy votes during the election, which analyst believed was part of what gave All Progressive Congress (APC) as a party head way in winning the presidential election and governorship election in many states (Lulu 2015).

#### **6. Election Monitoring**

To avoid election malpractices some local developers designed mobile apps and websites that can aggregate real-time updates from polling units from across the country; some of them with geo-tagging function to track these updates by location (Lulu, 2015). Nigeria Elections in a mobile app. It aggregates news around the elections, and also provides the listing of polling booths, national constituencies, presidential candidates and their running mates. The results of the election will be uploaded on the app when it is officially announced. Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), names after the country's electoral umpire – Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) -allows users get information on polling units, the election process and the status of their Permanent Voters' Card (PVC). Another similar election monitoring app is EiE's Revoda. According to Lulu (2015), Pollwatchng.com

and Nigeriadecide.org are websites that which allow voters/observers submit situation reports about the elections in their locale. Users can upload images with cursory comments about the situation being reported.

## 7. Online Campaigns

According to Lulu (2015), although traditional media: print, television and radio, remained the major sources of information dissemination in Nigeria, until enormous mobile penetration, data availability and cheap access; Internet usage in Nigeria grew by 16% in 2014, making a total of about 37.53% of Nigerians with internet access. Politicians joined the growing online community.

Political office hopefuls and their supporters took to twitter and sent out political messages with hashtags like #GEJ\_WINS, #CHANGE e.t.c. To show that they “got it”, both front-running political parties APC and Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP) have staged Google Hangouts. In February, the APC’s Vice Presidential Candidate, Prof Yemi Osinbajo, and Lagos State Governor Babatunde Fashola answered questions from Nigerian youths. The Peoples’ Democratic Party (PDP’s) Google Hangout session was staged for its Lagos governorship candidate, Jimi Agbaje.

An overwhelming torrent of websites and apps also dot the internet designed by political parties to reach supporters. Forwardnigeria.ng, Apcgmbpyo.org are affiliated with the PDP and APC presidential candidates respectively. They also embraced candidate-specific apps such as the General Buhari and the APC Situation Room for the APC presidential candidate, General Muhammadu Buhari and the other for his party, APC. Forward Nigeria was for the ex president and PDP presidential flag bearer, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan in the 2015 general election.

Individuals and civil organizations also drive conversation via the internet. Enough Nigeria Coalition’s eie.ng is a website that provides information on candidates vying for political offices as well as beams INEC’s press releases. Sterling and Greenback, a Lagos-based enterprise, also created a sentiment machine that measures the level of support for different parties.

The new media in Nigeria are increasingly being utilized to provide contact information about politicians. They are also being used to spread campaign message during election. Although the degree of influence on the electorate in Nigeria is not yet ascertained, however, Udende (2011) posits that though mass media were inadequate in Nigeria, they still played significant role in creating general awareness in the political process.

## 8. The advantage of the new social media in Nigeria political process

According to Oyeboode (2014), online media outlets are assets to politicians in both developed and developing democracies because they provide unlimited access to different categories of target audience. The multiple and composite features enable them to circumvent traditional barriers and censorship and alter the quality of debate between individuals, minority nationalities, states and international communities and challenge national limits and boundaries. The new media in Nigeria are increasingly being utilized to provide contact information about politicians. They are also being used to spread campaign message during election. Thus, since new media are a part of the mass media, they would have contributed to this assistance. The Internet is generally acknowledged to have promoted alternative media for politicians to use during and after elections. It has engendered wider latitude for political communication for both the politicians and the electorate. The Internet provides the gateway for reaching every class especially the youths who also share a high degree of political awareness. Facebook social media platform inaugurated in 2004 is now available in over 70 languages including English, French, Arabic, Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba.

In recent times, new media are used to collate feelings of the electorates, their prediction of election outcomes and their assessment of candidates’ performances during political debates or rallies. The new media breathes more life into political communication. Functionally, good political communication via the Internet enables the electorates to evaluate and chose the candidates of their choice thus conferring on the electorate the power of preferment (Oyeboode, 2014). They also allow candidates and political parties to showcase and mobilize the citizenry towards performance of their civic responsibility, posting political communication through the new media usually complement political rallies, radio and television news advertisements, postal and other published materials.

Although, Hurme’s (2009) study claims that campaign strategies do have an effect on voter’s preference and that engaging with candidates via their websites greatly increased partisan voter’s support for candidates in the 2008 presidential election in the United States of America. The new social media provide information about political parties, candidates and their party manifestoes, and also create a platform through which voters across religious and cultural divides can relate and interact, and share ideas with themselves on issues about these candidates. Hence social media became powerful enough to influence voter decisions and choices as many voters who had fixed their minds and conscience on voting a particular party or candidate began to change their minds based on certain information or idea they got online about the party or candidate.

## 9. The abuse of new social media by political parties and politicians

Social media cannot be separated from challenges. This relates to how political parties, party supporters, and politicians have misused the new social media platform, through which some of them vent their anger, frustration, oppression of oppositions, expression of ethnic and religious political sentiment which can heat up the polity and can even lead to conflict. According to Oyeboade (2014), political messages that can become dysfunctional may include stereotyping, demonizing, and brutalizing of the opponent. Demeaning the humanity of opponents through posting of graffiti on the web may equally lead to unpalatable outcomes. Deliberate lies and mounting of pictorials in the internet are also common nowadays to malign, intimidate and discredit political opponents thus triggering conflicts during electioneering and election periods (Oyeboade, 2014). One other misuse of social media is oppression of oppositions (and has happened in Nigeria), whereby political party in power force the internet providers through the Nigeria communication commission (NCC) to block the fund raising campaign platform created All Progressive Congress (APC) which almost led to political conflict.

According to Oyeboade (2014), other misuse of the new media includes privatization, whereby politicians only create web sites to post private matters. Some display pictures of their relations, new homes, parties attended and wasteful travels. This use does not create sense of patriotism on the audience. Internet addiction for private use is becoming a problem in Nigeria. In addition, on social media the ease of access to political information, there is a risk of segmentation, given that the possibility of focusing the selection of subjects to be accessed reduces plurality.

The internet enables individuals with specific interests to select only the information which strengthens their position. This behaviour can polarize opinions about certain social conflicts since it radicalizes attitudes and impedes contact and deliberation between opposing standpoints. Famutimi (2013) reported that researchers found that Internet over-use makes people live sedentary lifestyle causing them health challenges such as dry eyes, excessive fatigue, and withdrawal from friends, declining interest in hobbies, a decline in personal hygiene and backaches. All these forms of misuse of the new social media were prevalent during the 2015 election period in Nigeria.

## 10. Theoretical Framework

The use of the new social media as an effective drive for political organization and mobilization can be best explained using the mobilization theory. This theory states that the internet has the potential to: “inform, organize and engage those who are currently marginalized from the existing political system; so that these groups will gradually become drawn into public life and civic communities. Strandberg (2006) has noted that the mobilization theory recapitulates several optimistic visions regarding the internet’s ability to affect citizens’ political activity. The theory states that the internet has the potential to inform, organize and engage those who are currently marginalized from the existing political system; so that these groups will gradually become drawn into public life and civic communities.

Four arguments have been put forward in favour of this view: Firstly, the internet provides ample opportunity for political engagement. Secondly, the relative ease and low costs of receiving information via the internet could reduce the barriers for citizens to learn about public matters. Thirdly, the vast amount of information available on the internet gives citizens opportunities to become more informed about public affairs, and thus more articulate in expressing their views, and more prone to become active concerning public matters. Fourthly, as the internet enables two-way communication, it could strengthen and enhance the links between citizens and intermediary organizations. In sum, the internet constitutes a distinct type of opportunity for political participation which significantly diverges from traditional participation channels. Lusoli and Ward (2004) identify that the mobilization theory regards the internet as possessing the ability to inform, activate and engage citizens. The political on-line audience has grown considerably over time, largely due to the increased penetration of the medium, and also due to a shift of user preferences in seeking out political information.

Scholars have found that the internet is increasingly becoming an especially important source of political information for young people, a group of citizens normally less politically active off-line. Researchers such as Gibson and Ward (2005) and Norris (2003) have argued that their results indicate that the internet is offering a space for political engagement among those who might not have been otherwise active. That though the new social media (internet) has not yet changed the larger democratic process. The social media politically empowers people and increases their feelings of self-efficacy, levels of political participation, political interest, campaign interest and likelihood of voting. These scholars place strong faith in the internet’s ability to engage citizens.

A counter-argument questioning the optimism of the mobilization proponents has also been identified by some authors. Norris (2003) calls this the reinforcement theory. According to this line of thought, politics on the net will fail to politically activate and engage citizens. Essentially, this argument rests on two central observations. Firstly, access to the technological resources required to connect to the internet are unevenly divided across the world, and even socio-economically within specific countries. Moreover, and arguably of

greater importance in the long run, is the fact that on-line politics will only attract citizens already motivated, interested and engaged in off-line politics. All these affect the use of the internet for political mobilization.

## 11. Conclusion

The new media also commonly referred to as the new social media has impacted on political participation and has also provided an effective means for political mobilization. It has given those without access to official media an outlet to mobilize and air their views. Although Social media cannot be separated from its own negative challenges, which relates to how political parties, party supporters, and politicians have misused the social media platform, through which some of them vent their anger, frustration, oppression of oppositions, expression of ethnic and religious political sentiment which can heat up the polity and can even lead to conflict. Despite the challenges O Adedeji (2015) has argued that social media have acquired new forms of democracy, government and have become a more effective voice for many, and also have influence on all spheres of human life. The internet will increasingly be a veritable vehicle for political mobilization in years to come.

## 12. Recommendations

Based on the challenges and opportunities of the use of social media in elections, we recommend as follows:

1. The civil society should plan to use and equally encourage other election stakeholders to use social media in the subsequent elections in Nigeria as its advantages outweigh its risks.
2. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should create electoral acts/guidelines that will checkmate the abusive use of social media by politician and their supporters.
3. Social media site providers such as facebook, twitter, youtube, to mention but a few, should not allow political publications or sponsored political statements that seek to create hatred or incite violence which will heat up the polity.
4. Social media site providers should block/ban any political party that use provocative statements on its site.

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