

Social Media as a Factor for Increased Frontiers of Democracy in Nigeria's 2015 Presidential Election

Fatima Ijeoma Emetumah^{1*}

¹Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic Nekede, P.M.B 1036, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria.

Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

The study looked at the contributions of social media to the outcome of 2015 presidential election in Nigeria with a particular interest in uncovering social media influence on voting pattern of electorates; the reliability of information disseminated through the social media; and the perceived place of social media in the future political terrain in Nigeria. Survey method was employed with the instrumentality of questionnaire. The population of the study was the tweets, Facebook posts, and blogs on Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. Randomly, 200 sample sizes were taken from each of the purposively selected Facebook and twitter postings. Out of the 200 respondents that was selected 150 was returned and used for analysis. Findings revealed that though social media helped in creating political awareness among Nigeria's electorates; they also served as negative propaganda platform for dissemination of hate speeches. In conclusion, the study posits that despite the relevance of social media in the politics of Nigeria, its misapplication and utilization has the potential to divide Nigerians along ethno-religious lines. The study recommends enlightenment programmes on proper social media usage as well as stringent legislation to enable users draw the line between tasteful and distasteful statements.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: princessfatimanig@yahoo.com;

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social media allow people to create their own online page or profile. Users of social networking sites can communicate through their profiles with their friends and people outside their contacts in one and one bases or in a more public way. As such, social media such as Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, Whatsapp, and others have become important information dissemination platform. It offers people diverse ways to communicate online by the use of personal computers or laptops, I-phone or mobile phones. They are therefore like online platform that promote social communication and relationship among users. Unlike the traditional media, social networking allows people to easily articulate and air their individual opinion. In 2010, Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as a group of internet based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the exchange of user generated content [1]. Practically, Sweetser and Larisal describe social media in 2008 as a "read write" web in which a passive audience suddenly turn to become a web content contributor [2]. Patriotism is seen in Nigeria as a thing meant for the west where citizens enjoy infrastructural development. As a result, average Nigerian does not believe in working for the good of the people. According to Achebe, [3] the unpatriotic tendencies prevailing among the citizenry of Nigeria is because people see government renegeing in their responsibilities. Citizen's rights are violated and politicians plant themselves permanently in office without regrets. This obviously, Achebe insists could lead to misrule; hence, "True patriotism is possible only when the people who rule and those under their power have a common and genuine goal of maintaining the dispensation under which the nation lives. This will in turn only happen if the nation is ruled justly, if the welfare of all the people rather than the advantage of the few become the corner-stone of public policy". Nigerian politicians do not work towards the welfare of the people. They are concerned to themselves alone thus worsening the unpatriotic indices in the country. However, beside patriotism as expressed, the diverse nature of Nigeria project necessitate the political parties to have written or unwritten zoning agreement to enable each of the three major geographical region (six in all) to have chance of producing the president of the country. According to Adibe, the reason is to allay fears of region, ethnic or

religious domination of one region over the other. Meanwhile, these indices have been shaking Nigeria project to its foundation hence, the incessant records of electoral related violence [4].

1.1 Elections in Nigeria

Ever since the constituting of democratic rules in Nigeria, there have been series of corrupt practices in both the elections that bring in leaders and the period of leadership of the so called elected leader. The first democratic government in 1966 was marred and toppled by the military because of corruption. The second one in 1979 wound up abruptly for same reason; so also the celebrated June 12 purported win of Moshood Abiola in 1992. It was only the 1999 transition from military rule to democratic rule that gave the Nigerian people opportunity to closely monitor the wave of democracy in their country. Even at that, voting in elections were mainly selective than elective while the people sit and watch helplessly. Elections in Nigeria since the inception of democratic dispensation of the third republic in 1999 have been characterized with violence and disagreements along party, ethnic and religious divides. The same was obtained in 2003 and 2007 fourth republic elections. The elections recorded massive vote rigging, theft of ballot boxes and killings that foreign observers described the whole exercise as flawed. According to a Ghanaian economist Thompson, "Nigeria has once again failed to rise to the occasion...size is not enough... it is a failed giant". Available evidence shows that hate speeches was responsible for the election violence witnessed after the 2011 elections. To buttress the point further, Jega in Akubor analysed the elections in Nigeria as such that were characterized with electoral violence, pettiness, and intolerance associated with calumny. Thus, Akubor posits that the calumny that could incite hatred among people prevailed so much in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election to the extent that people started to move away from the areas they have lived all their lives to their home states for safety [5]. Thus, in Nigeria context according to Umar, hate speeches are categorized as statements that degenerate people on the bases of their religion, ethnicity/linguistic affiliation, gender, cultural practices and spread of rumours against people [6].

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the global acknowledgement of social media as an instrument of social, political and economic cohesion, it nearly threatened the progress of Nigeria's nascent democracy. Experts decried the wrong application of messages in social media platforms among users before, during and after 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Udensi [7] in 2015 reports how Nigeria's 2015 presidential election campaign turned the use of social media in information dissemination to a dangerous weapon; many feared that the outcome of the elections could make or mar Nigerian nascent democracy if not well addressed. The two leading political parties and their supporters took advantage of the social media to not only sensitize the populace on their manifestos, but also turn 2015 presidential election into bizarre of inflammatory speeches complemented with propaganda capable of disrupting the electoral processes and Nigeria's nascent democracy. No wonder, Orji [8] predicts social media as having the possibility of being misused greatly in 2015 presidential election; because the crowd- source technique used by many social media bloggers are from local communities who are sometimes with partisan interests and biases. Similarly, Ekinne [9] reiterates that the platforms are used to give false information, abuse, and incite violence, thus, social media advantage in promotion of Nigeria democracy became more confusing to assess.

Hence, this study aims to find out the role of social media postings to the historic win of the incumbent president in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election. The following questions guided the study:

To what extent did social media postings influence the voting pattern of electorates in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?

What is the reliability of the information disseminated via social media in 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?

How was the media ethics respected in the social media postings in Nigeria's 2015 election?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Igbinidu [10] the use of social media for political awareness was firstly started in Nigeria by President Jonathan Goodluck in 2009

to announce his intention to contest for presidential race. Just within 20 days of joining Facebook, his fans went up to 100,000. The former president used social media platform to not only spread his intention, but popularize himself to the Nigerian people and the world at large. Meanwhile, NBF News [11] reported that in 2011, President Goodluck Jonathan took advantage of the social media to spread his slogan of "I have no shoes" to attract the attention of Nigerians. The poverty state he portrayed about himself gave him the mandate of the people despite coming from the minority ethnic group in the country, though not without hiccups. Though, there were records of violence in 2011 presidential election [12], the exercise was generally regarded as an eye opener to the electorates. World-wide, the availability of web based technology and communication devices displaced the traditional media intermediacy offered by television and radio. The emergence social media utilization in 2011 election evolved the gradual adherence to the global trend in internet elections by Nigerians. Politicians were offered the opportunity of communicating directly with the electorates using online campaigns. As a result, an advocacy centre in Nigeria observed that many of the presidential aspirants apart from Goodluck Jonathan featured on social media; aspirants like Ibrahim Babangida, Atiku Abubakar, Ibrahim Shekarau, Dele Momudu, and Nuhu Ribadu used social media page to connect with voters and constituents [13]. The high number of likes for the social media postings of these aspirants showed that people were interested in their intentions. Unfortunately, some of the presidential candidates do not actively engage with their followers as they ignored questions from their followers hence rubbing them of the desired feedback which may create room for dissonance.

2.1 Common Social Media Networks

So many types of online social media networks are operational, but the most common ones like Facebook and Twitter, are reviewed.

Facebook: Facebook was initiated in 2004 by a 23 years old Harvard university student of psychology namely Mark Zuckerberg [14]. Initially, Facebook was developed as Harvard university student's social networking websites until 2005 when it was opened for American academic institution's use for free; so long you have an e-mail. Facebook expanded to include university students from other country and

people outside academic environment. Facebook has been able to establish various distinctive features that attract users to it. Profile pages on Facebook allow users to share information with their friends or the public. Facebook also have features like information section, status, friends, friends in other networks, notes, groups and the walls. There are two kinds of Facebook groups, normal and secret groups. Normal group is open for public invitation or discussion whereas the secret group is for private discussion. Despite the popularity of Facebook, research work shows that it poses negative impacts on the users, especially youths. As a result, many countries resorted to banning of Facebook use in official engagements. For example, according to Cockrosh [15] United States military banned their soldiers from accessing Facebook and my-space for fear of security breach. In the same manner, Benzie reported that 2007 [16] Canadian government stopped their employees from using Facebook.

Twitter: Johnson [17] revealed that Twitter was created in 2006 by programmers in Woah Glas podcasting company in San Francisco, California. It was created to enable users to read short messages (tweets) of 140 characters known as microblogging which accommodates both blogging and social networking. Unlike Facebook, Twitter allow interaction between users that do not follow their fellow accounts. Furthermore, Shephard [18] asserts that Twitter allows users to read and post tweets while non-users can only read posts. The platform made political communication easy for people irrespective of the person's level of knowledge. It therefore enables people to contribute in discussion of matters or challenges of great concern to them.

2.2 Social Media as a Communication Device

Social media has become an integral part of life as social websites and applications proliferate exponentially. It is the collection of online communication channels dedicated to community-based inputs, interactions, content-sharing and collaborations. Though it has no definite meaning, it is generally accepted as a medium of communication. Dominick in [19] argues that social media have altered the way communication is done; it has changed the idea of community and have greatly impacted on the culture of people. Omojuwa [20] specifically define social media content as the many tools

and space that help amplify the voice of ordinary Nigerians by bringing their news to homes, offices, and places most of them would ordinarily not have reached. Hence, Osa-Brown and Emenike postulate that the aggressive use of social media has changed the way some business people communicate with their customers. Likewise, consumers use social media to take charge of their shopping. In other words, social media is a form of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share ideas, personal messages and other media content. By so doing, social media has actually succeeded in breaking the traditional media method of top-down information dissemination or passage to give way to user-participation method. Apart from elections and electioneering campaigns, young Nigerians congregate on social media platform like Tweeter, Facebook, whatsapp to express their views on matters they feel are not well handled by government. For instance, through the platform in 2010, a protests tagged 'Enough is Enough' (EiE) initiated by Reclaim Naija project was organized by internet savvy Nigerians to monitor elections [12]. The group particularly used tweets and Facebook messages to whisk up interest and motivate them to go out and vote. This platform was also noted to have been instrumental to the eventual National Assembly resolve to name the then vice president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan as president on continuous hospitalization of late President Umaru Musa Yaradua. More so, 'Occupy Nigeria' slogan was initiated via twitter to organize and mobilize people for mass protest against former President Goodluck Jonathan because of fuel subsidy removal in 2012 [21]. On that note, African Practice [22] asserts that the ability of the 'Occupy Nigeria' movement to force government to rescind in their decision to remove subsidy showed the people's capacity to actualize their demand for change from the government at any time. In the same vein, social media aided Egyptians to gather people and shared common goals to stage a successful protest that forced government to its knees [23]. Social media as revealed by Omeruo conference paper presentation in 2010 was instrumental to the emergence of Mahmoud Ahmedinejad as the president of Iran in 2009 amidst traditional media negative reports; social network platform like Tweeter, Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube were used to disseminate information and garner international media support for the presidential candidate.

In Nigeria's 2015 electioneering campaign, opposition presidential and vice presidential candidates were very involving in their twitter accounts in which they engaged youths directly with the 'change' slogan they floated. Upon this massive youth engagement, many young people turned volunteers, campaigners and actively canvassed votes for them. Nairaland forum in 2015 [24] revealed the opposition presidential candidate and his vice presidential aspirant on 900 and 430 tweets respectively recorded a massive 117,000 and 80,000 respectively followers in five months of opening the account. The trend invariably weakened the traditional gate-keeping role of the media. On the other hand, President Goodluck Jonathan's twitter page that popularized him into winning the 2011 presidential election was virtually abandoned after the elections. This neglect sent a very bad signal on the perception of people towards the then president. Consequently, the forum reported; retweets on the page concerning the purported corrupt officials in Jonathan's government was a sure sign to the then president to wake up; but he never did. Even at that, Sahara reporters – which made its name in 2009 as the source to uncover the Nigerian underwear bomber that tried to bomb a US – bound flight with explosives; became the most populous social media and website with numerous followers [25]. The site gave people the opportunity to give eye witness accounts that formal outlets may be afraid to air.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This research work adopts dependency theory as propounded by Defleur and Ball-Rokeach [26] which centred on the importance of the mass media messages to provide varied unique and information functions, especially attitude formation and agenda setting. The theory believes that the mass media can help people develop certain attitude towards topical issues; induce interest and conversation, thus creating fear, anxiety or happiness on the issues as the case may be. As explained by Littlejohn, [27] people become more dependent on media that satisfy their information needs than those that do not; and as such, the more dependent an individual is on media, the more important the media becomes to that person. In times of confusion or societal upheaval, society seems to look up on the media to achieve social stability, especially in a crucial circumstance like a presidential election. Dependency media theory therefore brings forth several assumptions which

include that there is increased integral relationship among audiences, media and larger social system as a result of mass media contents; media can make individuals develop certain attitude about certain things, the more the medium has to offer, the more useful it becomes to the users, and that there are availability of variety of mass media where people derive information for need satisfying is more gratifying than single medium. The theory regards audience as completely active and seems to negate the possibility of people taking to media because of other reasons like habit or societal information.

Nigeria's social media users during the presidential election campaign relied so much on the platform as an avenue to get political information, have direct interaction with the aspirants and satisfy their desire of change even if it means spreading false information. The importance placed on the presidential election brought about the increase in social media usage; thus, Nigerians suddenly became dependent on social media postings in order to keep abreast of political happenings.

3. METHODOLOGY

Survey research design was employed for this study with the instrumentality of questionnaire. Specifically, descriptive survey research was adopted. Drew [28] opines that descriptive research is a commonly used approach to research in which the researcher wants to identify what is going on in a given situation. Population was taken to be 870 representing the whole tweets, Facebook posts, and blogs from the fans of the two major political parties; PDP and APC in April, 2015 presidential election in Nigeria in a special facebook page and twitter account of the researcher. Because of the popularity of Facebook and Tweeter, they were purposively chosen as the major social media platform to study. Hence, simple random technique was used to select 100 presidential election related comments from each of the social media under study to get a sample size of 200.

3.1 Sampling Technique

The researcher created a hatch tag (#pr) in her twitter account from where 100 tweets in which 2015 presidential election was mentioned were randomly selected. Similarly, considering that Facebook is a closed system, a page was

specially created and 100 postings were also selected for the same reason. Structured questionnaire were administered and retrieved back by re-tweeting and mentioning the handles of the selected fans and sending same questionnaire to the group on Facebook using @. At the end, only 150 responses were recorded from both twitter and Facebook postings and used for analysis.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Eight item questions aimed at eliciting answers from the respondents in order to answer the research questions were posed. Results obtained from the responses were presented in tables and pie-chart forms using frequency and percentage scores.

4.1 Presentation of Data Analysis

The data presented in the tables/pie-charts below comprised of respondents' responses of to the questions in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of Facebook responses

Variables	Frequency	% Frequency
Religion	12	15
Ethnicity	20	25
Culture	3	3.75
Gender	2	2.5
Disability	2	2.5
Linguistic affiliations	9	11.25
Objectivity	9	11.25
Propaganda	23	28.75
Total	80	100%

Table 2. Frequency distribution of responses from tweets

Variables	Frequency	% Frequency
Religion	15	21.43
Ethnicity	15	21.43
Culture	3	4.29
Gender	0	0
Disability	0	0
Linguistic affiliations	2	2.86
Objectivity	10	14.29
Propaganda	25	35.70
Total	70	100%

5. FINDINGS

The voting pattern of 2015 Nigeria's presidential election as represented in both facebook and twitter responses above, showed that people voted along the line of ethnicity, religious affiliation and propaganda. This is evident in the outcome of the study done in both facebook and twitter where the three variables recorded the highest responses (25%, 15% and 28% in facebook respectively; in twitter: 21.43, 21.43 and 35.70 respectively). Nevertheless, though some of the postings were seen as credible information, hence the score recorded in objectivity was 11.25% in facebook and 14.29% in twitter; experts still believe that most of the social media postings as at the time in question were out of 'hearsay'. The responses therefore, showed that social media platform played a major role in the voting pattern of the electorates; Nigerians became politically aware as a result of the activities of the platform, but with records of unpatriotic and divisive postings as evident from the responses. Consequently, due to heavy indulgence in hearsay and propaganda, some of the information disseminated via Facebook and Twitter could be regarded as unreliable. Moreover, traditional media as at the time became moribund as people preferred unfiltered information disseminated through Facebook than any other news media thus, given room for unethical standards. In addition, Facebook and twitter users took advantage of virtual nature of social media to send any information that promotes the interest of candidates of their choice irrespective of distaste in such information. This obviously shows that Facebook/Twitter users did not observe the ethics of communication.

Findings revealed that the social media postings were mainly based on religious, propaganda and ethnic divide, therefore violates the ethics of communication. Both tweets and postings from twitter and Facebook respectively had very few objective messages. Gender and disability had little or no influence, while linguistic affiliations and religion were considered in their postings and made great impact. These show that most of the information posted on the social as the time in question was not reliable. People used the opportunity given to them by Facebook to exhibit the different divides that are imminent in Nigeria. At the same time, the postings created so much awareness among the voters as to enable them to personally guide their votes against possible election malpractice.

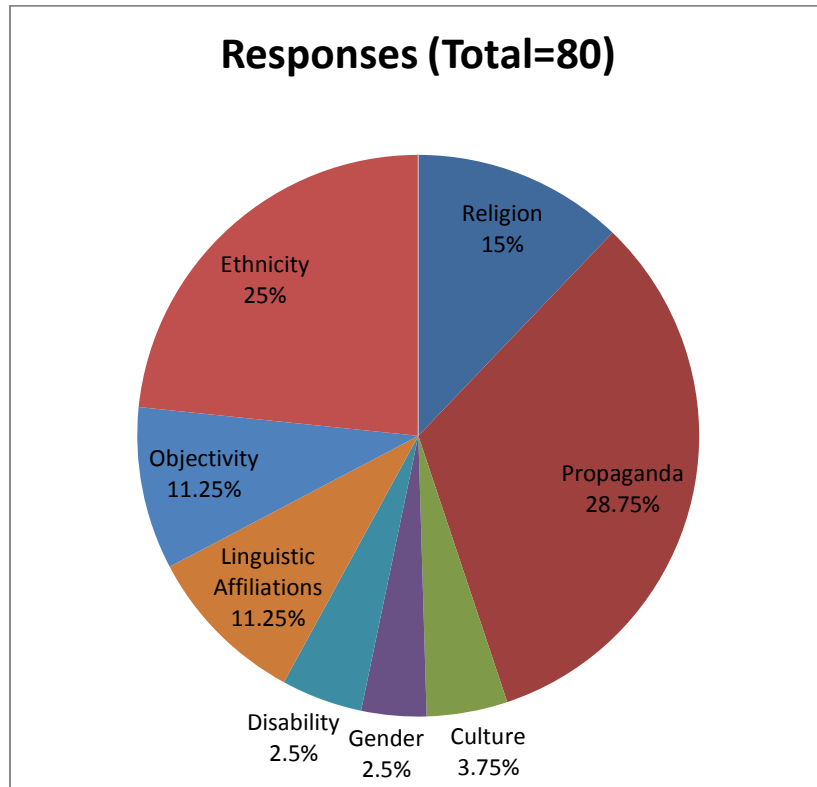


Fig. 1. Percentage frequency of the responses to questions on Facebook

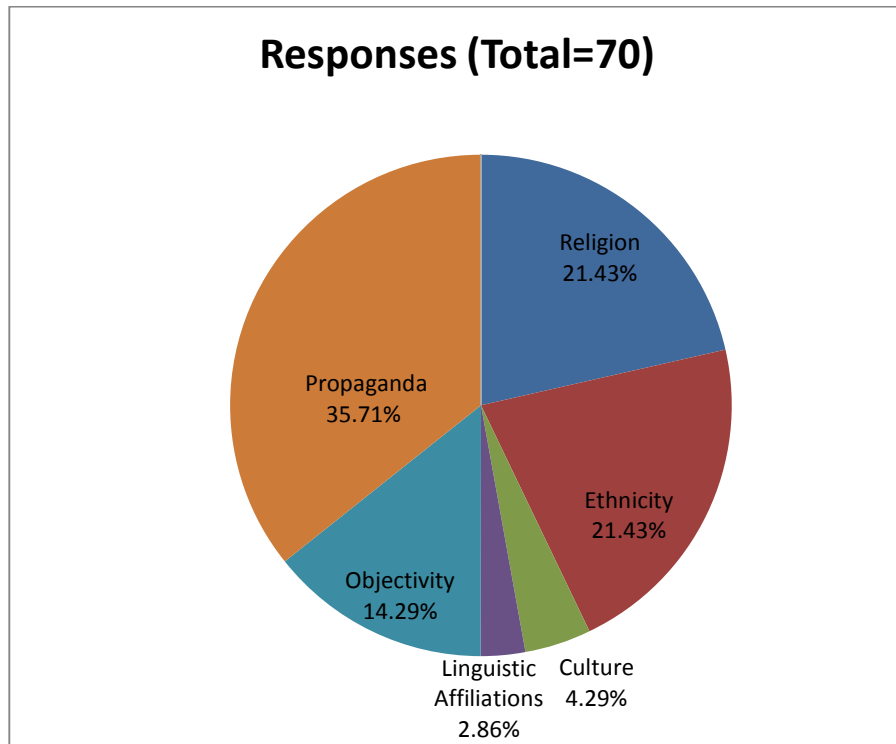


Fig. 2. Percentage responses to questions posed on Twitter

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, social media users grossly abused freedom of information offered through the medium in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election period. Odeyemi and Mosunmola [29] expatiated that the two leading political parties (APC and PDP) accused themselves of spreading false information on social media using their followers. However, due to unavailability of regulatory outfit, politicians succeeded in using the platforms to disseminate unofficial and inaccurate results that created controversies among stakeholders and political parties in violation to electoral acts guiding elections in Nigeria. Thus, the platforms became a new ground for propagating unreliable election messages. Nevertheless, social media helped shape the opinion of a lot of youths in the election and the increased political awareness and consciousness of the youths of Nigeria. The outcome was the emergence of an unbelievable win of opposition party (APC) over the ruling party (PDP) in the presidential election. From all indications, social media will have a significant influence on perception, expectations and demand for transparency of Nigeria's future elections if the necessary bottlenecks are check-mated. In line with the conclusions drawn, the study recommends that government should take a cue from other countries like South Africa, Canada, France and United Kingdom to institute legislation that that will be strengthened to become a law against the use of hate speeches in social media. There should be provision of social media censorship in a situation of hate speech of any type. Adequate awareness should be created among social media users on the need to respect individual's sanctity. In that respect, users must be made to understand the implication of employing hate messages in campaign to attract confidence and votes from the people. Government and concerned authorities should build an independent verification processes in social media source of information to affirm the accuracy of the reports they provide for public consumption. The legacy or traditional media should live above board by helping to make social media more responsible in terms of gate-keeping and fact-checking.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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