

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE 2015 NIGERIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Advances in information and communication technology are impacting the way we receive and process information. At the forefront of this development is the increased use of the social media. Social media applications like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and a host of others have not only become an essential feature of people's daily lives it has also influenced the way people receive, process, disseminate and share information. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the social media on the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. A qualitative study design was employed in the research problem. A non-probability sampling procedure was used to draw samples for the study. Data were analyzed through thematic categorization. Emergent themes were delineated and categorized about identifiable variables on social media influences on the 2015 presidential election. The results suggest that the social media has created a platform for the more democratic participatory citizenry and contributed to the outcome of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The results of this study are significant for political parties, those seeking political office, media practitioners, social media users, policymakers and the general public.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, Online Media, Social Media Platforms.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The world as we know it is changing at a dizzying speed. Advances in information, telecommunication and media technologies are culprits in the changes we are all forced to adapt to or perish. (Maho, 2017). The attendant social media revolution is having a chilling effect on mainstream media (Harper, 2010). The social media has become a dominant force in our daily lives. This fact is often taken for granted. However, it helps to be reminded that the phenomenal rise in information, communication and media technologies took an unprecedented turn in the last decade. The Washington Post Editor in Chief, Martin Baron captured these changes neatly at the 2015 "Hays Press-Enterprise lecture" at the University of California, where he highlighted the disruption that are the hallmarks of the last decade occasioned largely by social media. He concludes with an ominous certainty:

If this pace of change unnerves you, there is no consolation. Things will only get faster. Moreover, for those who resist the change rather than embrace it, there will be no forbearance or forgiveness. Their destiny is to be pushed aside and forgotten. That is the brutal truth. ("Washington Post Executive Editor," 2015).

Similarly, Technology reporter (for the HuffPost), Timothy Stenovec, reported that "if Facebook were a country, it would be the most populous nation on earth." His report was based on the social media platform's claim that approximately 1.4 billion people log into Facebook each month to scroll their news Feeds, communicate with friends and look at photos. (Stenovec, 2015).

In Nigeria, the current statistics on the number of internet users is over 48 million active users (“Nigeria has 48m...” 2014), making Nigeria one of the countries in the world with the highest growth in internet penetration. The trend in internet penetration and attendant broadband connectivity has allowed for the increased use of smartphones by Nigerians. Increased connectivity has largely democratized the information space and allowed for more participation in the democratic process. The online, social media now allow many Nigerians to freely create and share information especially on Facebook and Twitter. Ordinary citizens have become active participants in shaping events in the country through text messaging, status updates, photos, videos, tweets and posts that give a real feel of events happening in the most remote parts of the country as well as in the urban centers. This social media revolution arguably had a significant impact on the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The purpose of this paper is to study the significance of this impact by examining the relationship between the social media and the outcome of the 2015 presidential election and also to demonstrate that the social media has opened up the Nigerian information space and led to the more democratic participatory citizenry.

### **THE QUALITATIVE STUDY**

To achieve the general purpose of this study, interview sessions were held with purposively selected individuals who were frequent users of social media during 2015 Nigerian presidential election. The interviews were anchored on the following research questions:

1. Did the social media influence the outcome of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?
2. Has social media increased democratic participation in Nigeria?

The interviewees were purposively chosen because they were able to respond knowledgeably and authoritatively about the issue of concern. Purposive sampling suits this study because the technique entails the researcher deliberately selecting what constitutes his sample based on some predetermined purposes or aims as indicated above. (Easterby et al., 2008).

The interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed following the methods of textual and discourse analysis as propounded by Lindlof and Taylor (2002). This enabled us to extract meaningful patterns and themes for the study. The interviews were supplemented with opinion articles and social media status updates of the study population.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical base of this study is democratic-participant media theory of Dennis McQuail (2005). The central theses of McQuail's democratic-participant media theory can be summarised as follows:

- "Individual citizens and minority groups have rights of access to media (rights to communicate) and rights to be served by media according to their determination of need.
- The organization and content of media should not be subject to centralized political or state bureaucratic control.
- Media should exist primarily for their audiences and not for the media organizations, professional or the clients of media.

- Groups, organizations, and local communities should have their media.
- Small-scale, interactive and participant media forms are better than large-scale, one-way, professionalized media.
- Specific social needs relating to mass media are not adequately expressed through individual consumer demands, nor through the state and its major institutions.
- Communication is too important to be left to professionals." (McQuail, 2005).

Although this theory predates the social media, it appears to capture the very essence of the social media in the democratization of the channels and access to all forms of communication and information.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. Did the social media influence the outcome of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria?
2. Has social media increased democratic participation in Nigeria?

## **The Social Media and the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria**

The 2011 Nigerian general elections, has been documented as the first elections in Nigeria in which the social media played a significant part in the electoral battle of the contestants (Kperogi, 2012). However, nothing demonstrates the power of the social media better than the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Many movements sprang up in the social and online media, some independent some put together by politicians to pursue their political ambition and election into office.

The two frontline candidates of the PDP and the APC were most aggressive in their social media campaigns. It was a no hold barred game of information, disinformation, misinformation, fake news, red herring, propaganda all carefully designed to hoodwink the unsuspecting electorate. The idea was to dominate and control the conversation. Every dubious trick in the books was employed, and caution was thrown to the wind. Bogus social media accounts were created, smear campaigns were launched, doubtful information and propaganda were freely unleashed on the gullible public.

Surfing through this cyber mess was a double-edged sword. At once the millions of people who sourced for information from these platforms were happy to have the information they needed right at their fingertips and also share their views and thoughts. However, how much of this information was correct and free of manipulation was a different ball game.

The online and social media platforms also provided politicians the opportunity for advertising, campaigns and deepened conversations. While the mainstream media like newspapers, radio and television remained relevant in the heat up to the presidential election, we can say that a dominant part of the information that was dished out to citizens, especially the youths had its root in the social media. The reason for this is understandable. The social media could break stories faster while the mainstream media was forced to play catch up. Often most of the stories that were eventually carried by the mainstream media had already lost trend in the social media. This is logical. The mainstream media needs to painstakingly verify the truthfulness of a story before going to press. Unlike the social media, they are not likely to escape the loss of reputation or worse prosecution if it turns out that they cannot

defend the truthfulness of a story. Safe to say that most of the stories eventually carried by the mainstream media were sourced from the social media. It was common for most political office seekers and their sponsors and supporters to take to Twitter and Facebook to send out political messages with carefully crafted hashtags. There were popular ones like #GEJ\_WINS, #CHANGE, etc. Politicians especially the two front-runners also staged online events to engage with the youths to drive their messages home. Many of the campaign teams also opened particular purpose websites and apps to engage with their supporters. Forwardnigeria.ng for instance, was the PDP platform while the APC responded with "Apcgmbpyo.org." The two frontline candidates also employed customised applications in support of their presidential bids. The candidate of the APC, Muhammadu Buhari had the "APC Situation Room," and Goodluck Jonathan had, "Forward Nigeria." As if these were not enough the internet was awash with pop-up advertisements sponsored by both frontline candidates. It was a field day for online advertisements (Ebhotu, 2015).

Pollsters also took to the internet to gauge the level of support for their preferred candidate. Prominent ones were: "Sahara Reporters" and "Reno Omokri," ("2015 Presidential Election: Buhari floors..." 2015; "2015 Elections: Buhari leads Jonathan..." 2015). African Independent Television (AIT), at a different occasion, hosted polls on its website to measure the level of support for its preferred candidate. Suffice to say however that some of these polls were quickly pulled down when the results seemed not to be going the way of the poll's sponsors. As Herculean as this task was there were civil society groups who set up credible online resources designed to help citizens to seek the truth and engage constructively. Good examples were, "NigeriaDecides2105" and "Niajapolls."

Facebook was the most active platform. In the presidential election, the two frontline candidates of the APC and the PDP set up special teams to manage social media using several fronts to open Facebook accounts as an avenue to attack the opponent and post favorable comments about their principal. It got so heated that, the governor of Jigawa state at the time, Sule Lamido, remarked prior to the presidential election that, "If you go through the social media, what they paint is that APC has won almost 99 percent" He described the then opposition political party, APC as an "amalgamation" of desperation, saying the country is too big for them to govern. ("Lamido: If you follow social media..." 2015).

The then spokesperson of the incumbent President, Rueben Abati was quoted to have earlier called social media critics of the incumbent administration "collective children of anger" (Emmanuel, 2012).

The social media was mostly the attack platform of the opposition APC. The opposition aware that it could not match the ruling PDP naira for naira adopted a cheaper but most effective campaign strategy using the online and social media platforms.

It succeeded in drawing the ruling party into its psychological war game. At the time the PDP realized that it was losing the battle to win hearts and minds it was too late. The APC "creepers" have so much entrenched themselves in the social media platforms that the PDP was unable to catch up.

It was a high wired game of propaganda and manipulating the minds of the unsuspecting members of the public. All kinds of stories were thrown up by either side to discredit the other. More often than not these stories were outright fabrication and half-truths. Favourites were that an "ING government" was in the offing, Jega the chairman of the

electoral body was to be sent on compulsory leave; the election was to be postponed a second time to truncate the process. Hoaxes were cooked up to discredit the ruling party. (Oyenuga, 2015).

The ruling PDP was mostly exhausted and on the defensive. The PDP strategy was to portray the APC as a party of religious bigots and supporters of terrorists and terrorism. Its presidential candidate was fair game. He was the “grandpa” who was coming to impose sharia law all over Nigeria. He was brain dead and possibly senile. He had blood on his hands. He was terminally ill and was likely to die in office if elected. The APC portrayed the incumbent president as corrupt and inept. So many negative appellations were used by social media critics to discredit the president.

While the APC campaign was seemingly well coordinated and sustained, that of the PDP was in disarray. One can hazard a guess for the edge the APC had over the PDP in its campaign on the social media. Over a year before the general elections, the APC announced that it had engaged the services of a foreign firm, *AKPD Message, and Media* to boost its electoral chances. The same consultant who had worked for the election of the President of the United States of America, Barack Obama in his first quest for the White House in 2008. The firm’s ability and competence in generating the interest of young people and use of the social media to swing votes in favor of the Democratic Party candidate in the US is well known. In a statement Lai Mohammed the APC spokes had said: “As a party destined to bring change and succour to all Nigerians, APC is proud and excited to work with one of the foremost exponents of change in the world,” the statement said and noted that the Chicago-based firm was best known for its leading role in President Barack Obama’s presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012. *AKPD Message and Media* has worked with key Democratic Party candidates throughout the U.S., with a reputation for supporting leading populist movements across the globe.” APC claimed it had been working with the firm for several few months, adding: “we shall leverage on the firm’s skill, experience, and expertise throughout the upcoming campaign cycle. (“2015 elections...,” 2014).

Instead of the PDP taking a pragmatic strategy in addressing the threat posed by the engagement of *AKPD Message and Media*, the party would instead dismiss the APC as being anti-Nigeria, for employing the services of a foreigner to manage its campaign fortunes. Its then national publicity secretary Oliseh Metuh was reported to have said:

In engaging the services of a foreign firm, the APC has shown that it does not have faith in our people, our indigenous consultancy firms, and the teeming well qualified world-acclaimed Nigerian professionals and technocrats. Just as the leopard cannot change its spots, so also is the APC unable to hide its true color as an anti-people organization, tied to the apron string of foreign interests in utter disdain for fellow Nigerians and the age-long clamor for local content. (“Hiring of American firm...,” 2014)

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

### **Did the social media influence the outcome of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria?**

The empirical data indicates that the social media had a significant effect on the outcome of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. As observed by a respondent, “the social media space has been able to redefine how the electorate optimise the amount of information



available to them regarding facts and fictions.”Information optimisation in respect of the election was made possible by a large number of important updates about the elections on social media platforms. Users of these platforms turned their spaces on social media to make a stand on their preferences and also used it to campaign for their preferred candidates. This allowed citizens to follow up with updates of activities from the comfort of their homes and after that decide on whom to support. It must also be said that many of the “influencers” on social media were paid, employees. This is evident from the response of an interviewee, “We are out to influence public opinion on behalf of our clients. Moreover, we accomplish this in some ways including setting up multiple social media accounts especially on Facebook and Twitter, setting up group accounts, blogging is favorite. We try to get as many people to like these accounts or use all kinds of tricks to get followers. The aim is usually to direct, misdirected, credit, discredit, inform and misinform.”

Additionally, most of the respondents believe that the ruling People’s Democratic Party (PDP) lost the plot to the main opposition party the All Progressive Congress (APC) on all front especially the social media. “The President's media people were simply playing 'catch-up.' The Campaign Organization was often bereft of ideas. I for one did not remember Ahmadu Ali was the Director General of the PDPCO (Peoples Democratic Party Campaign Organisation), until after the elections. I do not remember a single statement he ever made. Compare that to Governor Rotimi Amaechi who led the APCCO, (All Progressive Congress Campaign Organization), both in the mainstream and in the social media. The narration was left to the APC while the PDP now tried to clean up whatever mess was left behind. Almost throughout the campaigns, the PDP was reactionary. They were so reactionary you begin to think whether it was intentional and consequently a sabotage or whether it was as a result of false confidence. The APC was in control of how the story was told- from the start to almost the finish”. The outstanding success of the opposing APC in wresting power from the ruling PDP has partly been attributed to its foreign consultant “it is all about the packaging, David Axelrod did an excellent job for the APC, give it to him. The bow tie- the suit- the mahogany desk- the little boy giving a high five to the General, the customized attires meant for different locations, the whole mix resonated with many people. It was a complete make-over. I guess the General would not have recognized himself again initially. The Buhari who was a pariah and 'unelectable' just four years earlier became a significant force, thanks to the social media.”

### **Has social media increased democratic participation in Nigeria?**

There is no doubt that increased social media use by Nigerians has led to a correspondent increased in democratic participation by Nigerians. The data shows that social media has provided a general platform for Nigerians, especially young Nigerians to air their views and contribute to the democratic debate, "where ideas are determined and shaped by popular debates and open participation in a situation where electoral decisions are concerned. Furthermore, political actors now have a veritable means of gathering authentic information about their campaign and get valuable feedback from the electorates. Evidently, the social media has become an important channel of communication between the contestant and the electorate and the importance of this communication medium will continue to grow in future elections. Smartphone technologies have also enabled the electorates to monitor election



results and ensure that their votes count.” This has reduced incidences of election rigging and increased confidence in the electoral process.

While acknowledging the immense role the social media played in the outcome of the 2015 Nigerian presidential elections we must also admit the negative side of this popular platform. The social media was used extensively to spread, misinformation and disinformation, hate speech and fake news to the detriment of the electoral process and the nation in general.

In spite of the trending opportunities in social media usage, users should endeavor to avoid words capable of endangering the peace of the country. Expectedly, users should be aware of the dangers inherent in the platform to national peace and unity. However, it is firmly believed that the social media will continue to play essential roles in future elections in Nigeria. This is given the fact that the social media is open and accessible to both the rich and the poor, the media novice and the media savvy, the rural and the urban dweller. The social media has made possible a new type of advocacy in electoral education and participation, which cannot be taken away from the people.

## **CONCLUSION**

With advances in technology, the smartphone has become an indispensable everyday requirement for virtually everybody, and it has had a tremendous effect on the way we receive, process and disseminated information. The pervasive use of social media and smartphones in Nigerian obviously influenced the campaign strategies of the gladiators of the 2015 presidential election, in many cases citizens who would ordinarily not show interest in electioneering and electioneering campaigns were empowered to do so via social media and the availability of cheap smartphone and broadband connectivity. Although social media and smartphones have their limitations, evidence suggests that they have become an indispensable tool in the hands of Nigerian citizens who have become empowered more than ever before to partake in the national debate from an informed perspective in the privacy of their homes. This is evident from the 2015 Nigerian presidential election which was won by the opposition political party, the All Progressives Congress (APC). Irrespective of this awesome power of the social media to mold public opinion and promote democratic participation, the platform has also come under much flak for being the purveyor of misinformation and fake news. Consequently, we can infer that the social media is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it has aided democratic participation, but on the other hand, it is capable of becoming an anti-democratic force through the natural spread of misinformation and fake news, which can lead to anarchy. This is a delicate balance which must be carefully handled through legislation, ethics, and individual responsibility.

To foster individual rights in the digital age, the Nigerian government should pass into law the Digital Rights and Freedom Bill, which has already passed second reading in the House of Representatives as at June 2017. Passage of this bill is significant because it assures citizens' rights to freely express themselves through online platforms and the social media in a responsible manner. Assent to the bill would give a boost to citizens' freedom of expression as contained in section 39 of the Nigerian 1999 constitution. This would be of benefit to active citizens' participation in the democratic process.

However, the rising specter of misinformation and fake news on social media is a cause for concern. There should be a concerted effort to fight the menace. To this end, social media users should take responsibility for what they post or share. A social media user must go through the pain of verification and vetting stories before clicking the share button. They should also pay attention to the biases of online sites and not accept everything they see as the truth because it aligns with their views and biases. Furthermore, mainstream journalism should rise to the challenges posed by the social media by paying more premium to quality and investigative journalism. Mainstream media should be the guardian of fact in a post-truth era.

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#### **ABBREVIATIONS**

- PDP: Peoples Democratic Party. (Nigeria's leading political party at the head of the central government between 1999 and 2015)
- APC: All Peoples Congress. (Nigeria's main opposition political party in the 2015 general elections and the winning party in the presidential election).

