Influence of New Media Theory on Political Parties in Nigeria: A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

This paper analyzes and discusses the observed influence of the new media theory with regard to political parties in Nigeria. This influence stems from characteristics of new media that allows individuals and groups to share knowledge, experiences, opinions, and ideas within and outside their group and in a McLuhan's sense of "global village", where such information are consumed by a global audience. The new media theory looks at features that make the new media ideal and fashionable as an instantaneous political communication tool that encourages a two-way communication using either top-bottom or bottom-top approach. This is a radical departure from the traditional print and television media that are not instantaneous and have a delayed feedback. The new media in all cases incorporates elements from the older media for its content. The print media fed from the oral media, radio from both print and oral media, Television incorporated elements of all three and the internet feeds from all the previous media. The print, radio and television were once the new media of their times, the internet and its applications are the new media of our time and in the future another media will feed from the internet to be the new media of the future time.

Key Words: New Media, New Media Theory, Political Parties, Nigeria.

Introduction: New media is a term that applies to the modern media of its time, which in the 1950's includes the television and today is the Internet (Lifvergren, 2011). "New" media is a relative concept. What is new today is old tomorrow thanks to rapid invention, globalization, and mass consumption of anything deemed even remotely entertaining by youth. During the civil rights movement in America a few decades ago, video footage of abuses against black students at universities or black citizens in restaurants and other public spaces sparked outrage that soon transformed into mobilization against the status quo. Video footage then had similar effects to tweets and pictures snapped on mobile phones today. But just like during the civil rights movement, people were impassioned, engaged, and involved even without technology (Alam, 2011). The question now becomes; where is the line drawn between the old and new media?

New media played a very crucial role in regime changes and political uprisings during the Arab Spring. Storck (2011) informs that "the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 have fostered a budding dialogue about the role of social media and networking as a tool for political mobilization towards regime change and pro-democracy movements" (p.1). A couple in Egypt named their new born child 'Facebook', born during the revolution in that country in recognition of the contributions of the social networking site (Paul, 2011). Time magazine named "The Protester" as the Person of the

year 2011 (Andersen, 2011), the protests would not have been so coordinated and culminated in the overthrow of dictatorial governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya without the use of social media (Ihejirika, Mbazie & Ndinojuo, 2015).

In Nigeria, political discourse on the social media networks has also witnessed an increase in recent times especially on Facebook and Twitter. Former President Goodluck Jonathan's Special Adviser (Media and Publicity) Dr. Reuben Abati wrote an article in the Guardian newspaper of August 2012, where he described critics of the government in the social media as "…..collective children of anger, distracted crowd of Facebook addicts who seem to be in competition among themselves to pull down the President". This confirms that Nigeria has a very vibrant social media user audience whose views have not gone unnoticed by the Federal Government (Ihejirika, Mbazie & Ndinojuo, 2015). This was in addition to the role social media especially facebook, twitter and youtube played during the occupyNigeria protests of January 2012 as a result of fuel subsidy removal by the then government of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan.

New Media Theory: Mcquail (2010) talks about the difficulty in defining the term "new media", such that the editors of the *Handbook of New Media* (Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006) chose to define them in a composite way, "linking information communication technologies (ICT) with their associated social contexts, bringing together three elements: technological artefacts and devices, activities, practices and uses; and social arrangements and organizations that form around the devices and practices" (p.39). New media in this context refers to new technologies of communication based on the merging of satellite communication; as well as new ways of their application (Ihejirika, Mbazie & Ndinojuo, 2015).

This entails that, the political party serves as the organization and the members share a social arrangement, where they can communicate with one another in a two way process, using devices such as computers, laptops, tablets and mobile phones all made possible through the new media. Communication in this sense can originate top to bottom or bottom to top when their followers on social media post on their walls (timelines) either a question or provide an information or clarification on a topical issue of the day.

Mcquail (2010) informs that "the earliest mass media of press and broadcasting were widely seen as beneficial (even necessary) for the conduct of democratic politics" (p.151). McLuhan (1964) offers an interesting perspective on the difference between old and new media, basically by saying that there is no static border between the two. His popular aphorism "the medium is the message", where he argues that new mediums feed from older media. Thus, the new medium of words consumed the older medium of sounds, and in a more modern context the newer medium of film consumed the older medium of the novel. In our present constellation, 'new media' consist of "older media" and therefore the two can be separated by time, and the newer media can be termed as 'new media'.

Today, this consumption is more intense than ever before and there is nothing indicating that it will slow down. With the digitization of all kinds of information such as speech, text, image and film, and the possibility of connecting everyone to everyone on the Internet, has made McLuhan's theories increasingly relevant (Lifvergren, 2011).

The new electronic media, according to Mcquail (2010), have been hailed as potential ways of escape from the oppressive "top-down" politics of mass democracies in which tightly organized political parties make policy unilaterally and mobilize support behind them with minimal negotiation and grass-roots input. They provide the means for highly differentiated provision of

political information and ideas, almost unlimited access in theory for all voices, and much feedback and negotiation between leaders and followers. They promise new forums for the development of interest groups and formation of opinion. They allow dialogue to take place between politicians and active citizens from the comfort of their homes, without the inevitable intervention of a party machine. Mcquail (2010) points out that;

> "The two main driving forces of change were initially satellite communication and harnessing the power of the computer. The key to the immense power of the computer in communication lies in the process of digitization that allows information of all kinds in all formats to be carried with the same efficiency and also intermingled" (p.39).

"The most widely noted potential consequence for the media institution is the convergence between all existing media forms in terms of their organization, distribution, reception and regulation" (p.138). During the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, the "change" mantra was popularized by the opposition party and it played a big part in the defeat of the incumbent President. The part played by social media in promoting the "change" slogan will be dealt with extensively in my future work that is currently in the writing stage.

Social media as the new media of today creates a digital library, allowing individuals to have access to all content from various mass media outlets on the internet. Therefore, a Facebook user who 'likes' the official pages of news outlets like BBC, CNN, AIT, Supersports etc. or a Twitter user who follows the news sources will receive the latest news updates on his timeline once he logs in, thus saving him the time of browsing their individual websites for news stories, he can then click the stories he considers most relevant for further information (Ihejirika, Mbazie & Ndinojuo, 2015). In the same way political parties can set up "Facebook pages" and "Twitter profiles" where their members and followers can 'like' their page or 'follow' in order to receive updates on party activities. Members can in turn 'share' such updates with their own 'friends' on facebook, or 'retweet' to their followers, thus proving to be a form of an unpaid promotion for the party (Ihejirika, Mbazie & Ndinojuo, 2015).

Communication has transformed globally from the unidirectional approach to the multidirectional approach, and is viewed to include feedback, back and forth which the social media platforms can provide. Therefore, information will not only come from the party, but can also be in response to a question a follower on these social media channels poses to the political party in the quest for more information or clarification.

Political parties can therefore take advantage of these social media platforms and inform their party members and undecided voters alike because the electorate on the internet are steadily seeking for credible information from organizations that are represented on social media platforms. Such platforms can also serve as an interactive media forum where party members and the general public can interact.

Review of related studies: According to Ihejirika, Mbazie and Ndinojuo (2015), the growing relevance of the internet or, more generally, new information and communication technologies (ICT) regarding political issues has been analyzed and documented by researchers since the 1990s (Davis & Owen, 1998; Davis, 1999; Römmele, 2003; Chadwick, 2006). Originating mostly from the disciplines of political science, communication and sociology, studies for example focus on the impact of internet access on voting (Tolbert & McNeal, 2003), the use of websites to reach voters (Jansen, 2004; Foot & Schneider, 2006), the role of the internet as a medium for political communication during election campaigns (Kilinenberg & Perrin, 2000; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan,

2012), visions of digital democracy and the role of new media (Hacker, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002; Tewksbury, 2006; Howard, 2006).

The potentials of social networking sites, blogs, microblogging (in particular, Twitter), wikis, as social software (Bächle, 2006; Green & Pearson, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005, Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2012b) appear to be most promising in political context as social software can be an enabler for more participation and democracy. Creighton (2005) defines public participation as the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making. The so-called "e-participation" focuses not only on this process but also on using the internet as an additional or exclusive instrument to create dialogues between the elected and the electorate. In the same vain, Karpf (2009) introduces the notion of "Politics 2.0," which can be understood as the harnessing of the internet's lowered transaction costs and its condition of information abundance, toward the goal of building more participatory, interactive political institutions.

To a political party, achieving a victory in an election is largely dependent on consistent support of voters (Anstead & Chadwick, 2008; Owen & Davis, 2008). However, in the current environment, soliciting and increasing voters' support during an election campaign has become somewhat challenging, as the traditional proactive role of supporters has changed into a passive role (Owen & Davis, 2008). This passive role especially emerged with the introduction of the television as a major instrument for political campaigning. Moreover, the time voters spend on supporting a political party has declined. Another challenging issue faced by political parties in election campaigning is reaching out to and getting support from young voters below the age of 30 (The Pew Research Center, 2008). As Ward, Owen, Davis and Taras. (2008) point out, young voters are the least likely to vote on Election Day. They are also the least interested in conventional politics.

Social media in this case allow political parties to alleviate these pressing challenges in relation to voters' support during election campaigns by facilitating support mobilisation. For instance, active involvement and participation of voters in the election campaign is highly sought after by political parties as these participants can further expand existing support networks of political parties by inviting their family members or friends to become an active supporter and, ultimately, to cast their votes for the political party concerned on Election Day (Owen & Davis, 2008).

Kindelan (2011) predicted that social media especially Facebook and Twitter will play an important role in the presidential election held in 2012 in United States of America, as just over one-third of respondents said the information they saw online made them decide to vote for or against a particular candidate during the Mid-Term election of 2010. With such statistics, social media have been credited as one of the key tools to the success of Barack Obama's victory in the Democratic presidential primary campaign and the US presidential elections (Swain, 2012).

Doris Graber's book *Mass Media and American Politics* provided useful statistics about President Obama's use of social media in the 2008 campaign and the apparent discrepancies between Obama's use and the use of his opposition, John McCain. These statistics, such as the fact that Obama had 2 million Facebook friends while McCain only had 600,000, show that Obama used social media much more than McCain in the 2008 election (Graber, 2010). Also, a November 7, 2008 article on the New York Times blog by Claire Cain Miller discussed the importance and effectiveness of Obama's use of social media, supporting the hypothesis that social media had an effect on the 2008 presidential campaign.

A study by Matthew James Kushin and Masahiro Yamamoto published in *Mass Communication and Society,* provided insight into the social media habits of young people (adults under the age of 30), a demographic targeted by Obama in the 2008 campaign. The study found that young people tend to get political information from social media more than any other age group (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2010). A 2011 study conducted by the Harvard Institute of Politics found similar results and concluded that 27% of young adults find that Facebook and other social media websites have more of an impact than any other type of advocacy (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2011). These two studies show that the use of social media helped Barack Obama target young people in his 2008 campaign.

Williams and Gulati (2009) investigated the extent of Facebook use by Congressional candidates during election campaigns in USA. They find that the number of Facebook supporters can be considered a valid indicator of electoral success.

Golbeck, Grimes and Rogers (2010) examine the use of Twitter by U.S. Congress members. They find that Congress members are primarily using Twitter to disperse information, particularly links to news articles about themselves and to their blog posts, and to report on their daily activities. Twitter is rather seen as vehicles for self-promotion. However, Twitter is also facilitating direct communication between Congress members and citizens, though this is a less popular activity. In a similar study, Lassen and Brown (2010) find that U.S Congress members are more likely to use Twitter if they belong to the minority party, if their party leaders urge them to, if they are young, or if they serve in the Senate.

Other works focus on the use of Twitter by citizens in political context. Applying social network and sentiment analysis on the data collected during the 2009 German federal election, Tumasjan, Sprenger, Sandner and Welpe (2010) show that Twitter is extensively used for political deliberation and that the mere number of party mentions accurately reflects the election result. In other words, microblogging messages on Twitter validly mirror the political landscape offline and can be used to predict election results. Conover et al. (2011) examine two networks of political communication on Twitter, comprised of more than 250,000 tweets from the six weeks leading up to the 2010 U.S. congressional midterm elections.

Ihejirika, Mbazie Ndinojuo (2015) studied the use of social media by political parties in Nigeria, they averred that most of the parties in Nigeria are not represented on the social media with 38% on facebook and 16% on twitter, and the few that are present do not have a large following and thus have not integrated social media in their public communication strategies, thereby indicating that the official political parties landscapes have not been hugely impacted by new media theory.

Benefits of social media population: One thing that any social media web community needs is members. Members are the commodity of social media websites. The more members, the more value; not just to the site owners, but to the community itself. If a community only has a few dozen members there is not enough content to make the site compelling (Surowieki, 2005),. Also, without enough people a community will not be self-correcting. Surowieki (2005), does this quite well in describing how crowds (as long as they maintain decentralization, diversity, and independence) come up with better answers and more accurate analysis than even the most qualified experts would provide on their own. One reason is that a large, diverse group will tend to corroborate correct information while canceling out errors. Well populated social networks have all the characteristics of a wise crowd. The benefits of a social media website are found in the connections that get drawn

between those that participate, connecting people, recommending resources, identifying expertise, and distributing content are all benefits to those who participate in and use these sites.

What Social media and political parties have in common is that they require a large population to be influential. Thus the higher the members, the more the number and influence the social media site or political party will have on the general public, bearing in mind that the processes of politics and democracy are all about numbers. The party or candidate with the highest numbers usually wins an election, and the most successful social media sites are the ones with the most members. This is because more members means more reach for the social media site, and this translates to more advertising revenue which will ultimately ensure the sustainability of the social networking site. These are features easily seen in both Facebook and Twitter.

However, this is not always the case in Nigeria. In the lead up to the 2011 general elections, the opposition Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) had the most followers on both facebook and twitter of any party in Nigeria and yet lost the general elections to the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP). In fact, the ruling PDP only joined facebook and twitter in April 2012, almost a year after the 2011 general elections (Ndinojuo, 2014). One begins to wonder the extent of influence social media had on the official party structures. Note however, that the major candidates in the presidential elections of 2011 all had well functioning social media accounts and it was a "big deal" to them, this is explained further below.

The then incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan on Wednesday 15th September, 2010, declared his interest to contest the presidential election in 2011 on Facebook instead of traditional media or at a large campaign event like other candidates. This announcement was strategic in the sense that it was on the same day former Military President Ibrahim Babangida also declared his intention to contest the same election (Ogunlesi, 2011).

However, while Babangida was declaring his interest at the Eagle square, Abuja; President Jonathan chose the social media site 'Facebook' to make his declaration through a video post. Within minutes, the Jonathan 'coup' had come to the notice of the world - leaping from Facebook to Twitter, news websites, wire services and mobile phones. The next day, newspaper headlines that would have been wholly devoted to Mr. Babangida's declaration, shifted their emphasis to Dr. Jonathan's: "Jonathan, IBB open Presidential bids," The Guardian said. "Jonathan declares ambition on Facebook," said The Punch. Jonathan's "crowd"— albeit virtual, made up of his Facebook "followers"— were at least 200,000, far more than the number that thronged the Eagle Square, Abuja, for the Babangida declaration (Ogunlesi, 2011).

Social media have the ability to spread available campaign material for almost free, which would normally cost more to get across via traditional media channels, to an almost precisely defined demography and storing it online for repeated viewing on demand. For instance, a video clip of the 'I Believe' message played at Eagle Square on Wednesday September 15, 2010 during General Babangida's declaration as well as his manifesto and agenda were uploaded to his Facebook page and that of a few support groups; thus serving as quick reference material for visitors to the page. A similar material broadcast over a TV network will cost money and will only be viewed by as many people as are tuned to that network at the particular time it is aired (Abdul, 2010).

Thus, political parties find themselves with a cheap alternative way of reaching old and potential members with their messages. In addition, the discussion boards on social networking sites allow the members to argue and debate among themselves, creating interactivity. Support groups on the social networking site like Facebook for any of the political parties are actually good recruitment grounds

for volunteers in political campaigning. Such groups can help recruit volunteers who can join in the campaign effort in different capacities; campaign coordinators, mobilization officers, network engineers, drivers, database administrators, office assistants, etc. (Ndinojuo, 2014).

Generally, the research field on social media in the political context is still young in Nigeria unlike countries like United States, Germany or Australia (Ihejirika, Mbazie & Ndinojuo, 2015). Little is known about the relevance of social media for politics in the national discourse or the factors of success for the application of social media for political purposes during election campaigns.

Problems of social media use in campaigns: Since social media is a relatively new way for politicians to communicate during political campaigns, it is not surprising that problems with social have arisen for politicians. A March 18, 2011 *USA Today* article (as cited in Smith, 2011) discusses the problems that the speed of this technology can cause. Referring to Twitter, the article contends that ―…it now only takes 140 characters to damage a political campaign‖ (Kucinich, 2011). Because these technologies move so quickly, any off color remark can instantly be read and shared by millions of people (Kucinich, 2011). An article by Noah Rothman, the editor of *Campaigns and Elections*, contends that blunders such as these are especially worrisome when candidates handle their own social media profiles without the help of staff, although opposition researchers say they do monitor social networks, it is not their main source of finding information (Rothman, 2011). The social media can also provide damaging material for opposition researchers when off camera comments are posted using social media.

A good example was the lead up to the 2012 presidential election in USA when the Republican candidate Mitt Romney made a statement at a private fundraising dinner about not caring for 47% of (poor) voters who do not pay taxes and live off government benefits. The remark was filmed secretly and uploaded on YouTube (NewsPoliticsNow3, 2012). Robillard (2012) reports that 3 in 10 independent voters polled answered that they were less likely to vote for Mitt Romney in the light of such a comment, nearly twice the number that said they will vote for him because of the remark. Without social media, such a remark might never have come to light, as it was a private dinner event, with attendance by invitation, thus very unlikely to be aired by the mainstream media organizations if it had not been uploaded on YouTube, and shared on Facebook and Twitter.

Peters (2011) discusses the problems political bloggers can also present for candidates with the rise of social media. While it is important to note that bloggers now play a role in the social media landscape, if used correctly, social media can provide new strategies to combat these problems (Greyes, 2011)). Another problem noted in these sources is the social media ineptitude of candidates campaigning in local politics. Pearson and O'Connell (2010) describe the need for local politicians to utilize social media correctly. They discuss problems and solutions for local campaigns using social media. Though many campaigns do not do this, they advise that engaging with constituents and having a concrete message are two of the most important things to remember when using social media.

There is an argument that holds that the acceleration of communication is the very essence of the democratizing potential of new media technologies (Barnett, 2004), considering that print, radio and television were once "new media" of their own time and the internet and its associated applications being the "new media" of our time, we can predict with certainty that with the technological advances that we have witnessed and with the studies and research works in progress, in the next 50

years, there will be a newer medium of communication that will feed from the internet and incorporating its technologies to become the "new media" of its own era.

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