Intellectual Discourse

Volume 26 Number 1 2018

International Islamic University Malaysia
http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam

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Volume 26 Number 1 2018

Intellectual Discourse is a highly respected, academic refereed journal of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). It is published twice a year by the IIUM Press, IIUM, and contains reflections, articles, research notes and review articles representing the disciplines, methods and viewpoints of the Muslim world.

Intellectual Discourse is abstracted in *SCOPUS, ProQuest, International Political Science Abstracts, Peace Research Abstracts Journal, Muslim World Book Review, Bibliography of Asian Studies, Index Islamicus, Religious and Theological Abstracts, ATLA Religion Database, MyCite, ISC* and *EBSCO*.

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print); ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

http://journals.iium.edu.my/intdiscourse/index.php/islam
Email: intdiscourse@iium.edu.my; intdiscourse@yahoo.com

Published by:
IIUM Press, International Islamic University Malaysia
P.O. Box 10, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Phone (+603) 6196-5014, Fax: (+603) 6196-6298
Website:http://iiumpress.iium.edu.my/bookshop

Printed by:
Workline Systems Sdn. Bhd.
37-1(1st Floor), Jalan Setiawangsa 11A
54200 Taman Setiawangsa, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Intellectual Discourse, 26:1 (2018) 111–132

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print); ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

Nexus Between Social Media and Democratization: Evidence From 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract: This study examines the link between social media networks (SMNs) and democratization process by focusing on the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria. Relying on Manuel Castells' network theory and empirical field survey, the paper investigates the prevalent conditions that have nurtured SMNs participation in Nigeria's democratic space and the challenges and prospects of social media as catalysts for deepening democracy in the country. The paper asserts that although social media remains veritable tools for democratic consolidation worldwide, the salience and impact are still at the nascent stage in Nigeria. Besides, institutional and legal impediments, economic and infrastructural challenges have contrived to limit the envisaged positive impact of SMNs in the democratization process in Nigeria. The paper recommends efforts to stimulate Internet penetration and social media affordance while the Nigerian cyberspace should be more democratised.

Key Words: Nigeria, democratization, democracy, election, social media networks

Abstrak: Kajian ini meneliti pertalian antara jaringan media social (SMNs) dengan proses pengdemokrasasian dengan menumpukan kepada Pilihan Raya Umum 2015 di Nigeria. Dengan bergantung kepada teori jaringan yang dicipta

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oleh Manuel Castell di samping dapatan-dapatan tinjauan di lapangan secara empiriknya, kertas kerja ini mengkaji keadaan yang lazim terdapat yang telah memupuk penglibatan dalam SMNs bagi ruang untuk demokratik terlaksana di Nigeria serta cabaran di samping prospek media sosial sebagai katalis untuk mendalami demokrasi di negara tersebut. Kertas kerja ini juga turut menegaskan bahawa walaupun media sosial tetap menjadi alat yang penting untuk penyatuan demokratik seluruh dunia, kesungguhan dan impaknya masih lagi di peringkat awal lagi bagi Nigeria. Selain daripada itu, halangan-halangan institusi dan undang-undang serta halangan-halangan ekonomi serta masalah infrastruktur telah dicipta untuk menghadkan kesan positif SMNs dalam proses demokratisasi di Nigeria. Akhirnya, kertas kerja ini mencadangkan usaha-usaha untuk meransang penembusan Internet dan kemampuan media sosial. Namun begitu, ruang siber di neagar itu patut lebih terbuka dan demokratik.

Kata kunci: Nigeria, demokratisasian, demokrasi, pilihan raya, jaringan media sosial

Introduction

The ubiquity of social media in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized, although its salience in elections and other democratic activities remains unclear. Nigeria's current democratic dispensation began in 1999, after a prolonged military rule. Since then, five general elections have been held in the country. Unsurprisingly, the general elections in 2011 and 2015 attracted so much attention locally, regional and internationally for many reasons: the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, candidates and interest groups utilised the social media for voter education, information dissemination, planning and general administration of the elections.

The elections witnessed an unprecedented deployment of technology such as card readers, electronic collation of votes and announcement of results. Nigerian Diaspora communities, in particular, were actively involved in the entire electoral process, by monitoring/observing and mobilising voters for the elections through the social media. This led to fundamental realignment of political forces, hitherto unseen in the annals of the country's political history. This article seeks to answer the following questions: What is the salience of social media in Nigeria? What is the role of the social media in the democratization process in Nigeria? How supportive are the enabling laws and regulations on social media in the country? What are the challenges of social media in the democratization process in Nigeria?

The above questions will be answered in five sections. After the conceptual definition of key terms such as democracy, democratization and social media, the second section focuses on the theoretical framework which explains the link between social media and democratization. The next section explores the salience of the social media in the democratization process in Nigeria and presents the findings from the field research. In the fourth section, the paper analyses the laws that regulate social media in Nigeria by focusing on the aborted social media bill initiated by the National Assembly in 2015 and the 'Lawful Interception of Communications Regulation' which was introduced in February 2013. The fifth section explores the dynamics, prospects and challenges of social media in Nigeria's democracy. The last section is the conclusion and recommendations.

Conceptual Clarification: Democracy, Democratization and Social Media

As a form of government, democracy connotes popular participation by the people in the running of government through the election of their representatives. In what Robert Dahl referred to as 'polyarchy', modern representative democracy usually have the following institutions: elected officials who, as representatives of the citizens, have control over government decisions about policy; free, fair and frequent elections of these officials; freedom of expression to enable citizens to express themselves on matters of concern to them; access to alternative sources of information; associational autonomy or independent associations and organisations in the form of political parties and interest groups; and a non-discriminatory and inclusive citizenship that safeguard fundamental rights and freedoms (1998, p. 86).

Democratization entails the enthronement of democracy. Linz and Stepan (1996, p. 7) view democratization as "a political situation in which a strong majority of public opinion holds the belief that democratic procedures and institutions are the most appropriate way to govern the collective life." In a democratised society, governmental and nongovernmental forces submit and subscribe to conflict resolution procedures that are guided by law and democratic ethos.

Generally, democratization is hinged on three assumptions: the first focuses on behavioural foundation and stability engineered and exhibited by the key political actors and institutions that sustain the

polity. Schedler (2001, p. 68) argues that "democracy is neither a divine gift nor a side effect of societal factors; it is the work of political actors" and, therefore, the behaviour of key actors matters in the entire political process. The second assumption outlines an entrenched democratic attitude in governance, whereby all major political actors subscribe to a "normative, strategic rationality and cognitive perceptions" (Schedler, 2001, p. 85) without which democracy will be at risk. This postulation envisions a political culture that engenders democracy and is not anti-democratic. The third assumption gives prominence to the socio-economic foundation of democracy. It notes that the socio-economic environment and its supportive institutional setting are necessary prerequisites in order to sustain and deepen democracy.

Democratization is a multi-layered "complex, long-term, dynamic and open-ended process" (Whitehead, 2002, p. 27). It nurtures in the citizenry and polity the ethos of rule-based, consensual and more participatory politics whereby the people are governed through their elected representatives based on established rules or what Max Weber referred to as "legal-rational authority." Scholars have also examined the difference between democratization and consolidated democracy. For C.F. Fernandez (2006, p. 7),

> While the democratization process *could* lead to a state with democratic system, a consolidated democracy encompasses the understanding of the system and the formal and informal acceptance of its own citizens in regard to institutional, political and societal obedience to democratic rules and practices.

Media represents the entire communication avenues and tools used to store, retrieve and deliver information or data. It comprises the means or channels deployed for general communication, information, or entertainment, in society. Media include newspapers, radio, television and the Internet. Social media refers to popular networks such as You Tube, Twitter and Facebook as well as forums, comments sections on mainstream newspaper websites and all social interactions that enable people to create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual communication media and networks (Leavey, 2013, p. 10). Social media networks (SMNs) is a subset of information and communication technology tools characterised by instantaneous, user-interactive platform. They are "online tools and utilities that allow communication

of information online and participation and collaboration" (Newson, Houghton & Patten, 2008, p. 3).

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 59-68) view 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." Looking at it from a pragmatic point of view, Sweetser and Lariscy define social media as "a read-write Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content" (2008, p. 175-198).

In all the above conceptions, it is clear that the ability to interact and engage in enduring participation distinguishes social media from the traditional media. For the avoidance of doubt, social media comprises all forms of online information and communication technology. These technologies exist in various forms such as magazines, internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, podcasts, pictures and video, which can be categorised into collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), blogs and Microblogs (e.g. Twitter), content communities (e.g, YouTube), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook), and virtual game world (e.g World of Warcraft).

Review of Relevant Literature

Since the debut of the major social media platforms such as Facebook in 2004, YouTube (2005) and Twitter (2006), the salience, ubiquity and ascendancy of social media networks (SMNs) in political discourse have been a much debated issue particularly in the democratization literature. In this vein, the historical roots and evolution of social media have been studied by Kaplan and Haenlein (2012). Also, the role of social media in democratic consolidation in sub-Saharan Africa has been explored (Khorram-Manesh, 2013; Muse, 2013; Ghannam, 2011).

While technological developments, especially in the media, have always been viewed as potent tools for democratization, the recent attention to SMNs followed the same pattern such as the focus on traditional media, especially its technological innovative capacity to disseminate information to a wide audience and thereby widening the democratic space. Particularly giving fillip to the salience of social media in the democratization process was the contagious *Arab Spring* that swept across Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Bahrain in 2011,

popularly referred to as the Facebook, YouTube and Twitter 'revolution.' The uprising led to the collapse of decades-old authoritarian regimes in these countries.

A very strong nexus has been established between democracy and economic wellbeing, part of which technological diffusion, inclusiveness and egalitarianism are part of its subsets. In his seminal work, Lipset (1983, p. 41) posits that "all the various aspect of economic development – industrialization, urbanization, wealth, and education– are so closely interrelated as to form one major factor which has the political correlate of democracy." In the same vein, Larry Diamond (1997) emphasized that poverty tends to doom democracy while prosperity advances it.

Basically, there are two different schools of democratization theorists: the 'preconditionists' argue that certain particular set of conditions and experiences must be satisfied before democracy would emerge. A notable work of the preconditionists is Samuel Huntington's 'waves' of democratization (1991, p. 119), which seeks to operationalize democracy by insisting that the accountability of government to an elected parliament and universal adult suffrage are two institutions germane to classifying a political system as democratic. The 'universalists,' however, postulate that democracy can emerge "in all sorts of ways and settings" regardless of the varying conditions and experiences in the particular place (Berman, 2007).

The nexus between the SMNs and democratization is still a subject of much debate. Schudson (2003), for example, argues that the democratization-media nexus dates back to past centuries with the development in printing press and its contributions to democratic movements. Following the emergence of telegraphs, telephones, radio and television, often tagged the 'new' media, these technologies were ascribed broad potentials for democratic advancements.

But other pundits believe that the Internet is a strong tool in determining political outcomes. For example, Bruce Bimber (1998, p. 136) argues that the Internet thrives on "accelerated pluralism" to galvanize support for a political cause. He asserts that "the Net is accelerating the process of issue group formation and action" even as it leaves the structure of political power unaltered, unrevolutionised or transformed into a new democratic configuration. Bimber notes that individual's penchant to participate in political activism is independent

of expansion of communication, because the people would still have participated without the agency of the Internet.

Linnie Rawlinson (2008) views the social media as crucial in determining electoral outcomes beginning from political recruitment, voter mobilization and extending and widening the political support base. Rawlinson (2008) asserts that "in order to recruit voters online, candidates must appear to engage with potential supporters on a far more personal level, on their terms, in their environment." Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) also notes that the social media technological innovation and tools have the potential to "extend the public sphere through the Internet." An interesting and extreme enthusiast of the power of the social media is Albrecht Hofheinz (2011, p. 1417), who claims that "if you want to liberate a society, just give them the Internet." In the same vein, Andrew Shapiro (2003) suggests that advances in communication technology would permit everyone to become "not just citizens, but *citizen governors.*"

The nexus between social media and political participation in Nigeria has also been of much academic and scholarly interest (Okoro & Nwafor, 2013; Smyth, 2013; Ette, 2013; Ojo, 2003). A recent study by Jamie Bartlett, Alex Krasodomski-Jones, Nengak Daniel, et al (2015) also examined the utility of social media for election monitoring in Nigeria. The authors view social media monitoring as capable of providing better understanding of network influencers, for early detection of sudden events such as violence, prompt tracking and response to electoral misconduct, rumors and misrepresentation.

Schudson (2010, p. 172), however, argues that rather than ascribe so much power and efficacy to the new media, the Internet should be considered as "a potentially potent but underutilized democratic tool, one that is only as useful as the citizens who employ and implement it for political purposes." Groshek (2003, p. 142) also cautions that "the diffusion of the Internet should not be considered a democratic panacea, but rather a component of contemporary democratization process."

In his empirically based analysis of democratic growth between 1994 and 2003, Groshek (2003) succinctly concludes that Internet diffusion did not solely lead to national-level democratic growth, and posits that the much vaunted power of the Internet in democratic consolidation has not 'fully crystallized.' He opines that perhaps in the future, there may be such democratic effects catalyzed by the Internet.

Groshek (2003, p. 158) asserts that "virtuosity and democratic agency are not inherent in media technologies, no matter how interactive or participatory." Rather, he locates the potential for democratization in the individual citizens, who apply and make use of the communicative technology to advance democratic ideals and participation. These studies point to a growing role for the social media in particular and the mass media in general although it remains to be seen the extent of social media impact in the democratization process in Nigeria. Therefore, the next section will explore the salience of social media in Nigeria's democratic space.

Theoretical Link: Social Media and Democracy

The theories of social media and democratization or digital democracy can be categorized into two: social tie theories explain the effect of digital communication on democratization while communication affordance theories examine the salient feature of digital tools for democratic communication (Smyth, 2013). This paper relies on Manuel Castells' network theory, a genre of social tie theories, which posits that characteristics of social media networks tend to promote political activism. Network theory postulates that 'weak ties' created through the anonymity provided by the Internet and the egalitarian nature of users of online communication, usually devoid of socio-economic and political classes engenders democracy. Manuel Castells (1996, p. 388) suggests that "[w]eak ties are useful in providing information and opening up opportunities at a low cost." He argues that the Internet gives its users the opportunity of forging weak ties with strangers in an egalitarian pattern of interaction where social characteristics are less influential in framing, or even blocking communication. Thus, the weak ties have an inherent strength of social bonding, which is also crucial for democratization.

Castells' network theory is predated by Mark Granovetter's (1973) study entitled *The strength of weak ties*. In the study, Granovetter identifies two types of social ties: strong ties (as in those with family members and close friends) and weak ties (those pertaining to distant acquaintances. According to Granovetter, the strength of a social network tie is anchored on "a combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie." He postulates that because of its formalism, inherent 'cliquishness' and overall network fragmentation,

strong ties are relatively fewer in number, they are more difficult to establish and also take longer period to sustain.

Contrarily, weak ties possess the exact opposite characteristics and they are easily formed and sustained. Weak ties promote wider political advancement through the flow of information and ideas which are germane to political mobilization (Granovetter, 1973). In essence, weak ties are more important in engineering a robust political activism and organisation, especially in a heterogeneous society and community such as Nigeria, as these ties serve as bridges that connect two parts of a social network.

Social media networks such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Whatsapp, provide the platform for the creation and maintenance of weak ties. They are veritable bridges across social divides and they produce dramatic effects on political systems by shaping democracies (Donath & Boyd, 2004). Social networks also inform, mobilize, entertain, create communities, increase transparency, and seek to hold governments accountable. More importantly, social media has revolutionized political communication from the need to "share it" to the imperative to "share in it" (Donath & Boyd, 2004).

In a nutshell, Netizens (citizens on the net) who live in Netville (where latent ties are activated) produce weak ties that have strong impact on political organisation, through the instrumentality of SMNs, although this interaction and outcome should not be misconstrued as technological determinism (Hampton & Wellman, 2003). Thus, the social media has become a veritable space for democratization where politics is "framed in its substance, organization, process, and leadership, by the inherence logic of the media system, particularly by the new electronic media" (Castells, 1997, p. 368). The link between micro-level interaction and macro-level patterns in social networks is often buoyed by the strength of weak ties, which has the potential for "diffusion, social mobility, political organization, and social cohesion in general" (Granoveter, 1973, p. 1361) as part of its intrinsic characteristics.

Salience of Social Media in Nigeria's Elections

The salience of social media in elections has been linked to three developments. Firstly, the global trend towards 'internet elections' or 'e-electioneering' buoyed by the rapid growth in internet penetration

and availability of internet-ready devices. In addition, the evolution of web-based news media such as websites, social networking sites, blogs, e-newsletters, have virtually upstaged the network television, radio and newspapers. Essentially, the social media have been credited with relative ease of use, speed and reach, thus enhancing efficiency in the coverage and reporting of elections (Macnamara, 2008). Secondly, the penchant by politicians to explore the advantages of social media for online campaigns has also widened its salience in Nigeria. Political parties have also exploited social media platforms to campaign and recruit volunteers as well as raise funds for their campaigns.

Thirdly, social media became popular due to their increased use by the Nigerian civil society organizations such as *Enough is Enough* and the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), who became more alert to the ills of election rigging and manipulation and were apparently determined to ensure a credible, transparent, free and fair exercise. This resolve was in part strengthened by the outcome of the *Arab Spring* uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. In effect, the Nigerian cyberspace exhibited participatory, interactive and cost-effective channels of political mobilization and democratization.

As discussed above, the potential of the social media network to deepen democratic norms and practice in any polity remains an ongoing debate among scholars. The salience of social media and its possibility of determining the outcome of elections in Nigeria is therefore conjectural due to the paucity of empirical data. On a comparative level, a Pew Research Center survey in 2008 reported that nearly one quarter (24 per cent) of Americans said that they regularly learned about candidates and their campaigns on the Internet while the youth identified Facebook and Myspace as their sources of information (Pew Research Center, 2008).

However, Nigeria's share of Internet users globally is about 2.5 per cent as of March 2016, although Internet penetration has been growing since 2000 in relation to the country's increasing population. From a meagre 78,740, representing 0.1 per cent of the population in 2000, the country recorded a surge to 1,749,576 (1.3 per cent) in 2004, 23,966,247 (15.9 per cent) in 2008, 46,560,001 (28.4 per cent) in 2011, 82,094,998 (45.1 per cent) in 2015 and 86,219,965 (46.1 per cent) in 2016 (See Table 1 below for details).

Table 1: Internet Users in Nigeria

Year	Internet Users	Total Population	Internet Penetration (% of Population)
2016	86,219,965	186,987,563	46.1%
2015	82,094,998	182,201,962	45.1%
2014	75,746,751	177,475,986	42.7%
2013	65,670,276	172,816,517	38.0%
2012	55,182,852	168,240,403	32.8%
2011	46,560,001	163,770,669	28.4%
2010	38,261,938	159,424,742	24.0%
2009	31,041,429	155,207,145	20.0%
2008	23,966,247	151,115,682	15.9%
2007	9,962,224	147,152,502	6.8%
2006	7,947,035	143,318,011	5.5%
2005	4,955,023	139,611,303	3.5%
2004	1,749,576	136,033,321	1.3%
2003	740,569	132,581,484	0.6%
2002	414,185	129,246,283	0.3%
2001	113,289	126,014,935	0.1%
2000	78,740	122,876,723	0.1%

Source: Internet Live Statistics (http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/nigeria).

Interestingly, Bartlett, Krasodomski-Jones, Daniel, et al (2015, p. 5) found that "although Internet and social media penetration is growing quickly in Nigeria – especially via mobile phones – it still represents a small proportion of the whole population." For example, in March 2015, about 1.38 million Twitter users posted contents on the election and 216,000 Facebook users shared contents on their pages. According to a 2015 report, the most common mobile phone activities by users in Nigeria were using Facebook (58 per cent), browsing the Internet (47 per cent), sending SMS (39 per cent), taking photos (38 per cent),

listening to FM Radio (36 per cent), instant messaging (34 per cent), playing games (34 per cent), downloading apps (28 per cent) and using Twitter (14 per cent) (IT News Africa, 2015).

Data Collection and Analysis

A field study was carried out by the authors of this article barely a week to the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, to ascertain the sources of information on electoral decision among the citizens. Questionnaires were administered to a total of 3,000 sample population randomly selected on the Akoka campus, out of the estimated 40,000 population of the University of Lagos, Nigeria. The researchers ensured that the questionnaires were administered to only adults of 18 years and above, who were eligible to vote under the Nigeria's Electoral Act 2010 (As Amended). The respondents were asked to indicate their sources of information on candidates and political party programmes, which would in turn shape their choices during the elections.

Analysis of the 2,936 questionnaires returned revealed that many of the respondents relied on newspapers, radio, television, posters and the social media in that order. The responses showed that newspapers are the most popular source of information on politics in the elite circle (81 per cent), followed by radio (76.9 per cent), television (76.4 per cent), posters/banners (72.1 per cent), and social media (70 per cent). Since the survey was carried out in the University of Lagos campus, with high rate of Internet penetration and access to social media networks, it was surprising that social media was ranked fifth as source of news on the elections. This survey outcome could be said to be a vivid reflection of the status of the social media in the wider Nigerian society, especially among the elites.

Table 2: Sources of Information on the 2015 General Elections in Nigeria

Sources	No of Respondents	Percentage
Newspapers	319	81.0%
Radio	303	76.9%
Television	301	76.4%
Posters/Banners	284	72.1%
Friends	277	70.3%
Social Media	276	70.0%
Handbills	275	69.8%

Sources	No of Respondents	Percentage
Party Rallies	269	68.3%
Debates	242	63.4%
Telephones	242	63.4%
Relatives	201	51.0%
Road Shows	189	47.9%
Total	**2936**	

Source: Researchers' Survey, 2015

Discussion on Findings

Using the Klout to estimate the influence of African online media reported that former President Goodluck Jonathan scored a relatively high level of influence (49-83) compared to other political personalities in Nigeria in 2013. Klout influence is "the ability to drive action, such as sharing a picture that triggers comments and likes, or tweeting about a great restaurant and causing your followers to go to try it for themselves" (www.ofrica.com). Jonathan had a record 300,000 and 1,028,588 Facebook fans in 2011 and 2015, respectively. However, this influence diminished rapidly towards the election and failed to secure for the candidate a crucial electoral victory in 2015.

In the same vein, 40-50 hashtags were identified on the eve of the elections. Digital activism such as the hashtag *#BringBackOurGirls*, which was started by Nigerian lawyer Ibrahim Abdullahi, assumed an international social media campaign with over 4.5 million tweets as at April 2014, following the abduction of about 300 school girls by the terrorist group, Boko Haram in Chibok, Northeastern Nigeria. The campaign, which has been identified as one of the issues that contributed to the failure of the Jonathan administration in the 2015 elections, highlighted the administration's lackadaisical attitude to the rescue of the girls as it was initially signaled by ambivalence and disbelieve (Freedom House, 2015).

Other social media campaigns such as *Reclaim Naija*, (an election incident reporting system on violence and electoral malpractices using short messages), *StateCraft* (promoted by the All Progressives Congress supporters), Google Hangouts (a question and answer forum for political parties and young Nigerians), *BuhariFix* (a platform to

offer suggestions to Buhari), *Buharimeter* (a forum that tracks electoral promises), and *#OpenNASS* (an advocacy platform to demand openness and transparency in National Assembly budgets), collectively deepened electoral choices and promoted civil engagement. In the same vein, the *Naija Cyber Hacktivists* and *Nigerian Cyber Army* separately attacked and brought down government websites, including INEC's, and caused distributed denial of service (DDoS) against newspapers such as the *Punch* and *Premium Times* during the presidential elections in 2015.

Based on the advice of Morozov Evgeny (2011, p. 198), in order to analyse the impact of the Internet on political activism, one must ascertain the "qualities and activities that are essential to the success of the democratic struggle in a particular country or context." Next is to explain how specific social media has facilitated campaigns and collective political action among the citizenry and thus affecting the identified qualities and activities. In the Nigerian context, the economy, security and social challenges as well as overall political brinkmanship in the months preceding the elections contrived to make "change" inevitable. For example, out of the 2.91 million tweets identified during the 2015 general elections, 1.14 million were from Lagos and 454,000 from Abuja (Bartlett, Krasodomski-Jones, Daniel, et al., 2015).

However, it can be misleading to ascribe the outcome of the 2015 general elections solely to the social media, thereby promoting a "false sense of efficacy." This illusionary misperception thrives on the belief that "the impact of mass mediated information on a person's understanding of politics and participatory behavior should be highest if the person exposes him or herself to relevant information in the mass media and also talks about it to other people…" (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2004, p. 880).

In reality, the sheer number of Nigerians on the social media network has not translated effectively to bringing out the votes except for a unified political action on sundry issues which has not deeply affected governance and democratization. For instance, about 28.6 million votes were cast for all the candidates in the 2015 elections out of about 67,422,005 million total registered voters' population (INEC, 2015). This indicates that more than half of the registered voters did not participate in the election despite the social media glitz generated by the election.

In line with the prevailing conditions that spurred the Arab Spring, the presence of 'revolutionary conditions' such as dwindling economy, insecurity, inflation, public distrust of political officeholders, endemic corruption, among other forces of discontent in Nigeria, have contrived to facilitate a yearning for change in political leadership. Therefore, the inability of the state apparatus to contain these forces ignited so much frenzy about the election (Jebril, Steka & Loveless, 2013). In practical terms, issues such as political violence accounted for 408,383 Tweets out of which 89,000 dwelled on Boko Haram, 51,000 (bombing), 175,000 (electoral violence), 50,000 (other violence) and 34,000 (other issues) (Bartlett, Krasodomski-Jones, Daniel, et al., 2015, p. 56).

Generally, as a democratic instrument of political discourse and interaction, social media platforms allow the sharing of an overwhelming number of videos, photos, tweets and comments, a development that limited electoral malpractices in the recent elections because people tended to behave well when they became aware that they were on camera (Omokri, 2015). This development was corroborated by the Chairman, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Prof. Attahiru Jega, who observed that the use of the social media during the 2011 elections enhanced transparency and made the electoral umpire more accountable to the public (Amuchie, 2012).

Challenges Faced by Social Media in the Democratization Process

Legislative and regulatory impediments have denied Nigerians the full benefits of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act signed into law by President Goodluck Jonathan and the amendment of Section 84(1) of the 2011 Evidence Act, which sought to improve online activities by incorporating the admission of statements and signatures produced electronically in documents as evidence in court.

Specifically, the lack of internet-specific legislation in Nigeria offers a mixed bag of fortunes and challenges to social media activities. Ironically, this situation provides for unbridled use of the Internet to advance democratic and undemocratic causes. For example, the office of the National Security Adviser and the Attorney General introduced a draft Cyber Security Bill in November 2011. The bill revised the Cyber Security and Information Protection Agency Bill by reducing the powers of security officials to seize ICT equipment and arrest suspects based on only suspicion (Adepoju, 2012). At the same time, Nigeria teamed up

with Russia, China, and the United Arab Emirates to introduce a proposal at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Conference on International Telecommunication Regulation in Dubai. The bill seeks to grant extensive powers to national governments on Internet. However, the proposal was blocked by United States, United Kingdom, Egypt and Kenya, which expressed concern that the regulation was open to abuse and poses threat to Internet freedom (Techdirt, 2012).

Specifically, threat on Internet freedom and electioneering became ominous in February 2015, when the regulatory agency, the Nigeria Communications Commission shut down the SMS short code used by the opposition All Progressives Congress to raise funds during the electoral campaigns. The action was widely interpreted as being politically-motivated (Freedom House, 2015). Earlier, in February 2013, a draft Lawful Interception of Communication Regulation bill was introduced with a view to monitoring Internet communications within Nigeria's cyberspace (Emmanuel, 2013). While the government claimed the move was meant to safeguard the cyberspace against cyber security threats that could undermine national interest and security, it was generally seen as a menacing targeting of political opponents.

In a related development, the Nigerian Senate debated a bill titled: "A Bill for an Act to Prohibit Frivolous Petitions and Other Matters Connected Therewith." The bill sponsored by Senator BalaNa'Allah was later dropped after public outcry and protests. It provided for two years imprisonment or N4million fine or both for persons convicted for false or abusive newspaper, radio and television statements. The bill also seeks to impose two years' jail term or N2million fine or both for offenders of false phone text messages or messages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or Whatsapp. The bill was withdrawn after it generated attention in the social media circles and people, mostly in the civil society organizations, derisively dubbed it an "anti-social media law" (Kermeliotis, 2015). These legal and regulatory moves have contrived to deny Nigerians the benefits of social media in the democratization process.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Social media networks such as You Tube, Facebook, Twitter and various micro-blogging sites have contributed to democratic consolidation in Nigeria, albeit slowly. There is a steady growth in the percentage of

Internet penetration in the population and the number of citizens that explore social media for civic engagements and discussion of democratic issues is on the rise. But, based on the empirical data relied upon in this paper, the role of social media in the democratization process in Nigeria, especially during elections, seems to be exaggerated. There are obvious challenges that need to be tackled in order to derive maximum benefits from the social media. Among them are legislative impediments and regulatory obstacles that have contrived to deny many citizens access to the social media.

The opportunities/cost/benefits of social media are many. For instance, it provides platform for engagement on political, economic and social issues. It brings the electorates nearer to the government through its feedback mechanisms. It can also limit the propensity by citizens to resort to self-help, anarchy, protests and riots, where there are no channels of communication and avenues to vent their grievances and anger. Besides, social media are veritable tools for public enlightenments, education and information. It also provides employment opportunities for teeming youths who have technological innovative abilities.

However, the challenges of social media in the democratization process in Nigeria include inadequate electricity supply as the country still battles with less than 5,000 mega watts of electricity generation and distribution. There is also high cost of tariff, poor Internet coverage, negative government perception of the role of the social media in the national polity and overall economic development, and negative use of social media tools (Muse, 2014). Social media are capable of igniting a volatile political issue and exacerbating it to communal discord within a short period. It is often abused, misused and exploited to spread volatile, malicious, unfiltered and hateful message against target audience/groups. In Nigeria, social media is most urbane and elitist and the government has often used ICT to counter democratic processes deemed unfavorable to their interest (Ojo, 2003; Shirky, 2011).

This paper asserts that as social media provides real-time coverage of events through mobile devices, it is useful to transmit live coverage of political events and thus put local and international pressure on the government. Therefore, its democratic potential should be explored rather than discouraged. Similarly, social media is useful in relaying the demands of the masses, criticizing government decisions and

programmes, demanding policy reforms, and constitutional reviews, and creating employment opportunities, exposing corruption, demanding independent judiciary, transparency, accountability, free, fair and credible elections. Social media provides quick medium to initiate political action and ideological change as witnessed in Nigeria in 2015.

As noted by an anonymous social media activist, Facebook can be used to schedule protests, Twitter to coordinate it and YouTube to tell the world as demonstrated during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria (Chebib & Sohail, 2011, p. 139). Conversely, a poorly managed and harnessed social media is a potential tool for polarizing the society along its fault lines such as ethnic, religious and regional division although it also permits dissemination of diverse political views and opinions. As social media is open to manipulation and abuse, it requires a high level of digital literacy to ascertain the veracity of information being circulated. The educational and national orientation agencies have roles to play in this regard.

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In This Issue

ISSN 0128-4878 (Print)

ISSN 2289-5639 (Online)

ISSN 0128-4878
2289 5639