



Social Sciences Research

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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION: PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The complexity of Nigerian politics and its attendant weakness in social cohesion constitute a great clog to Nigeria's socio political and economic development. The emergence of new media as hoisted on the internet and its ancillaries like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter etc with their quantum leap in information flow, has impacted greatly on the political landscape. This is bridging the hitherto wide information gap between government and the governed in Nigeria. This paper examines the theoretical basis for new media, using a reflective analytical method; it rationalizes the link between new media and the quest for democratic consolidation in terms of its growing utility for civic engagement in Nigeria's fourth republic. The paper also examines the inherent challenges drawing from Nigeria's experience. This is in addition to a critical foray into the dominant arguments amongst the major divides of the adherents of new media about its efficacy in ingraining democracy. It suggests a multi pronged approach for using new media to tackle the pervasive nature of poverty, the unbridled level of corruption in governance and the challenge of terrorism in the country. With these it is hoped that an atmosphere for a robust engagement between government, business sector and civil society entities can be engendered. This is with the ultimate aim of asserting its reverence as an indispensable effect for democratic consolidation globally and Nigeria in particular.

Introduction

As the communications landscape gets opaque, complex and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech and enhanced ability to undertake collective action in the political arena (shirky:2011,p.29).The global reach, instantaneous speed and unlimited information now available through various terminals mostly hoisted on internet, cable TV, mobile phones using different platform facebook, twitter, you-tube and the likes has in no small measure exerted a modicum of effect on governance. This is more pertinent when its utility and inherent spread in terms of its wide range of information deployed for socio-political mobilization and cohesion is the focal point. The relative belated move aimed at tapping into the world of opportunities by Nigeria might not be totally unconnected with the character of the regime type bequeathed on her just before the dawn of democracy in the year 1999. Information muffling and sometimes outright emasculation of the processes designed to accelerate provision of avenue for self-expression, and its accessibility on different communication spectrums which were features of successive military governments in

Nigeria, is equally partly responsible for the delay of in depth analysis of its utility in governance talk- less of its democracy sustaining potentials.

Extant literature is replete with analysis of the role of the conventional media in strengthening democracy in Nigeria (Mgbejume: 1991, Olukotun: 2001, Ajibade: 2003). However, the digital revolution sweeping across the globe has in no small measure narrowed and played down the gap hitherto existing between time and space with a spiral effect on conventional media practice. This has in no small measure redefined the relationship between the government and the civil populace in Nigeria. To do less in the direction of fostering a robust relationship between new media and politics in Nigeria, especially in this era of thoroughly devolved information platforms might be unsalutary especially in a deeply fragmented entity like Nigeria.

Research Problem

The purpose of this paper is to show how new media effect has engendered democratic practices. This is with a view to encouraging a further devolution of the information spectrum. By democratic consolidation, it is implied that the ingredients of democracy which includes freedom of expression, association and freedom of speech are deemed to be a part of fundamental rights of men well entrenched in chapter four of the constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria (as amended) (Akande: 2000,p.73). The extent of exercise of these democratic rights within the Nigerian state, and at the same time abhorring an infringement of the rights of fellow stake-holders in the Nigerian project has remained a daunting task. Closely related to these is the emerging trend of exploring new media platforms for electoral values with its attendant utility as veritable mechanisms for demanding accountability from public office holders in the fourth republic is worthy of rigorous academic interrogation.

Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. Explain the interconnectedness of new media platforms and socio-political expression amongst Nigerians.
2. Identify the basis for optimism and pessimism of new media as a veritable tool for democratic consolidation.
3. Identify and recommend counter measures for battling attendant abuse of new media platforms in a fledgling democracy like Nigeria.

Literature review

The virtual political system has quickened the pace at which governments and civil societies adapt to information technologies and the future openings for active citizenship and civic engagement. Scholars are however divergent in their views on the emerging trend-“New Media”. Cyber optimists have been unanimous in acknowledging digital revolution as perhaps the most important development of this generation and even our lifetimes (Norris, 2001). To Norris, limitless information available via the internet and its ancillaries has a potential to imbue in the public a vast amount of knowledge about public affairs, more articulate in expressing their views via e-mails, chatrooms and more active in community affairs. Situating new media properly within the spheres of politics, Schwartz (1996), and Norris (2001,

303), posit that; as a virile means of information dissemination, new media provides a two-way channel of communication between the citizens and other gate keepers within political system such as political parties, social movements, interest groups and even the conventional news media as well as public officials and agencies of government.

To these cyber optimists, information of international and global relevance on governance can be made readily accessible and to a large extent have positive multiplier effect on political participation, civic engagement, campaign analysis, mobilization and the building of coalitions around policy problems and general advocacy. Amplifying earlier positions on the relevance of new media, Rheingold (1993), Budge (1996) advanced arguments to reinforce Benjamin Barber's (1984) theory on direct Democracy. New media to them has evolved as platforms that allow opportunities for citizens' deliberation and direct decision-making through online referendums and other initiatives all geared towards devolution and grass roots mobilization to fix even problems that are local in nature.

Closer home, Fayemi (2012) submitted that the tools of new media complements its capability as tools for enhancing information and interflow of communication across numerous actors with capacity and capability to ignite swift social change. This change accordingly is reverberated in daily routines of e-commerce, e-publishing, e-learning, e-voting etc. All of these, as argued will certainly continue to serve as a key driver of employment opportunities and economic growth for developing and rapidly evolving democracies.

On the flipside, pessimistic disposition of some political analysts regarding new media has been hinged on its volatility. The digital culture as typified by the internet, websites, computer multimedia, e.t.c can be at once "liberating and equally capable of spinning out of control" (Fayemi 2012, p.3). The institutional linkage between the internet-generated democratic revival has been called to question by the skeptics who on one hand acknowledged the utility of the new media as a valuable supplement to traditional forms of communication, but could not comprehend how established parties and interest groups would allow the new media to flourish at the expense of heavy weight media corporations who have always reasserted their predominance. McChesney (1999,p.182-185) chronicles the American situation where mass media giants like the CNN and the New York Times were subtly persuaded into focusing more on entertainment thereby reducing it utility as a viable platform for political mobilization. The mediated forms of political communication which the cyber culture breeds might be an inadequate substitute for the traditional face-to-face political networking Putnam (2000). This has been a major challenge for new media as an instrument of social cohesion as against the overly ambitious disposition of the optimists who see new media as being "a sine qua non" for viable political relationships and veritable platform for a bottom-up civic engagement. Interestingly, socio- economic biases which are evident for decades in conventional mass media seem unlikely to disappear even with the new media revolution. It is argued that these bias as earlier admitted is capable of spinning a negative salutary effect on the agenda-setting role of the media whether conventional or "new". This line of thought is aptly reinforced by Davis and Owen (1998, p. 12) thus;

the global and social divides in internet access mean that technological resources remain far from equally distributed and online politics may thereby amplify the voice of the affluent and well educated, with prior interest, cognitive skills and technical ability to utilize new forms of communication, but may further marginalize the apathetic and the under privileged (p.12).

Political participation to this end typifies the views of communities dominated by likeminded groups who merely reinforce views but not typically exchanging ideas tend to pervade the political landscape at the expense of a deliberative inclination- a necessary condiment for liberal Democracy.

New Media, Democracy and Democratization: A Nexus

The enormity of the task of civic engagement, political participation vis a viz media access have been a daunting one. This challenge is even more profound in relatively newer democracies. Nigeria, with sixteen years decade of representative democracy is not an exception. A unique feature in Nigeria's experience is that the new media revolution has gathered momentum almost at the same time and pace with the military disengagement from politics in the country. Statistics show that Nigeria has witnessed a phenomenal growth in online activities from 200,000 internet users in December 2000 to over 43 million people maintaining on line presence in January 2012 (worldstarts.com).

This figure towers above other countries within the continent having higher GDPs and GNPs than it does like Egypt (17 million-users), South Africa (5 million), Morocco (10.4 million users), Algeria (4.7 million) (www.internetworldstarts.com/af/index).

As at the second quarter of 2015, internet users in Egypt totaled (48,300,000 million-users), South Africa (26, 841, 1265 million), Morocco (20,207,154 million users), Algeria (7,153,178million) and Nigeria posted a phenomenal (92,699,924) (www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm). This is a tremendous improvement in all the countries sampled above. The uniqueness of the Nigerian situation can be seen in the outcomes of the 2015 general elections which coincidentally witnessed a democratic regime change from the incumbent Peoples Democratic Party's sixteen year hold on power to the opposition All Peoples Congress. This valid coincidence witnessed a great deal of exciting scenarios hoisted on a broad spectrum of new media platforms in Nigeria.

This is a follow up to the tradition established in the United States of America where the seamless reach of new media and its attendant power of mobilization, opinion formation and more specifically, civic engagement, were extensively explored in the electioneering campaigns leading to the emergence of President Barak Obama. His presidential election victory in 2008 used the internet effectively to his advantage, particularly in the area of fundraising where he was reported to have raised a whooping sum of thirty-two million United States Dollars in January 2008 from over two hundred and fifty thousand contributors (wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundraising).

Consequently, the general elections in Nigeria in the build to the 2011 and 2015 general elections respectively drew inspiration from the Obama template. Realizing the immense opportunity provided by the soaring number of internet users as potential voters to be swayed for electoral success, the cyberspace came alive with several authors (professional and unprofessional) striving assiduously to win political sympathy using the cyberspace. It is however not a surprise, that the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Muhammadu Buhari in the build up to the 2015 general elections made an entry into the twitter space with the handle @ThisIsBuhari (Vanguard, December 22, 2014). The opposing camp of the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan also reacted by activating a twitter handle @OurGEJ in addition to a revalidation of all other social media platforms hitherto shut down after winning the 2011 presidential elections.

It is instructive to note that President Goodluck Jonathan's familiarity with the utility of new media platforms, his experience and acceptance by the youths who formed the bastion of voters in the 2011 general elections cannot be put aside. President Goodluck Jonathan in 2011 had accessed a sizeable chunk of the Nigerian voting public on the social media- facebook. This culminated in the publication of two books; "My Friends and I" and "Bring Back the Book". These were innovations geared towards detailing the feedbacks garnered in the course of the electioneering campaigns of 2011, stressing the need to rejuvenate the diminishing reading culture among Nigerians and particularly the youths who form the bastion of facebook users. This narrative of new media showcases an acknowledgment of a fact by frontline political actors and their teeming supporters of the complementary avenue for a broad spectrum of political mobilization in an electoral contest. Interestingly, events from the presidential elections of 2011 and 2015 show that; candidates with the highest presence and acceptance on new media and its myriad of ancillaries won the election.

It will not be out of place to posit that Nigeria's renewed attempt at democracy was borne into the "new media" milieu. This forms the basis for political actors in and out of government and other stake holders including but not limited to the civil society to harness a critical mass of informed minds for social-political transformation and electoral integrity drive. This move has gained currency in the opinion of scholars whose views have attempted to draw a correlation between new media and democratization. Norris (2001) identified three core issue areas of concern in interrogating the relationship between new media and its utility in accentuating democratization. These are:

- i. What are the types of institution moving online?
- ii. What are the functions of these political websites in maximizing transparent interactive communication?
- iii. What explains the rise of digital politics and in particular how far does socio economic, technological and political development drive this process.

The basis for these positions as asserted by Norris (2001) is predicated on the belief that, the new media revolution to a large extent helps to broaden the political landscape through digitalization of the conventional media platforms. This is more so,

when political stake holders can freely and spontaneously interact while also feeling the “pulse” of the citizenry and vice versa.

To the extent that those institutions originally meant to act as gate keepers play an important role in the agenda setting and agenda building process and can equally channel information about government back to the public. The greatest challenge to this move however, is the paucity of new and multi-media content necessitating a fall-back on the traditional media for content generation. The reason for this according to (Fayemi, 2012), stems from the lack of ownership, accountability and the attendant lack of performance indices for measuring return on investment in this direction. This has almost always rendered the new media as a postscript in the process of civic engagement within the democratic landscape.

Alluding to this position, Mark (2012), perceptively echoed similar sentiment about the limited utility of new media and its social content. He also used the occasion to reiterate the need for a regime of censorship as a result of new media and its social confederate’s inability to orchestrate rebuttals. His reservations are better summed in the following words:

the emergence of social media like facebook, twitter, blackberry messenger, YouTube etc have changed the face of media practice by making information sharing easier, faster and quicker. But this is not without its demerits. Social media has become a threat to the ethics of media practice and good governance because of its accessibility and absolute freedom. Every freedom carries a responsibility. Even in advanced democracies, where we all agree that good governance is practiced, there is no absolute freedom...

A blend of the two schools of thought was provided by Jibrin (2012) while championing the role of new media in democratic governance, submitted that new media tends to cater to society’s trend towards limited “sound bites and short attention spans”. It argued that new media often do not provide context analysis or a deeper understanding of issues. However it has increased awareness in governance in the area of election management and other germane public policy matters which hitherto were shrouded in some level of secrecy.

Corroborating the submissions above, Jega (2012) highlighted the gains of new media as a veritable ally in election administration in Nigeria. Transparency, swift feed backs for security intervention and above all civic mobilization of the youths for electioneering campaigns are immediate areas of intervention for the new media according to Jega (2012). Coming from the Chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission in Nigeria who had responsibilities of conducting the 2011 and 2015 general elections, the narratives of the discourse of new media in this direction would be better enriched if these views are not discountenanced. The internationally acclaimed improvement in election administration in Nigeria is partly attributed to value propositions offered by new media “revolution” (COG, 2011). These encomiums are however not without an acknowledgement of the reality of misinformation, illiteracy and narrow scope to which the new media can be fraught.

New Media as a Lever for Democratic Consolidation: Opportunities and Challenges

The hangover of Nigeria's checkered political history dotted by military interjections naturally inhibits media freedom which is an inalienable component of democracy or civil rule. The reckless mangling of this fundamental right under successive military juntas left a debilitating effect on the psyche of the political class (Ajibade, 2003). The emergent civilian governments became somewhat primed to once again gagging associated right of speech, especially with the dominance of retired Generals in the body politic of the nation. It is therefore not surprising to have some of the soldier-turned politicians canvass for new media censorship and control (Mark, 2012).

New media censorship as canvassed by Mark is a reflection of the body language of the ruling elite in Nigeria to media plurality which new media epitomizes. For scholars at the forefront of media pluralization within the context of Nigeria's present political development, new media is almost a belated relief. A plural media according to Aliagan (2006) creates a sustainable democratic culture. Conventional media in Nigeria according to him, have to a greater extent limited itself to promoting democratic politics at the expense of engendering democratic culture. This is one lacuna the new media must seek to fill.

The pervasive nature of poverty has also constituted a major clog in the wheel of progress of the new media pundits. This is without prejudice to the impressive leap in the statistics of internet users in Nigeria between the year 2000 and 2015 (www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm). This clearly illustrates the prospects for the new media and its ancillaries as a veritable tools for socio political and economic mobilization against poverty. The much touted increase in internet usage has not aided penetration. A critical examination of the distribution and profile of users as illustrated above is skewed primarily to the economically advantaged class. This has a debilitating effect on the utility of the new media as a tool for political mobilization and democratic strengthening. Reinforcing this line of argument, Mohammed (2004) opined that new media and its ancillaries is a preserve of polities who are already "rich" in informational resource.

Despite accusations of crass elitism cum neo-colonial posturing of the anti new media revolution as epitomized by the argument of the skeptics earlier advanced. The invaluable potentials of the various spectrums provided by new media through which civic engagement can be established, conducted and regulated cannot be over emphasized. Without recourse to the global hype, it has remained the evidence and basis for the much acclaimed "global village" of the world. Viewed from the Nigerian context, the teething problems retarding the pace of democratization and institutional reinforcement can be readily addressed through a broad spectrum of opportunities provided by the "New" media revolution especially in areas where the conventional media has proven to be inadequate or obsolete.

Liberalization of information dissemination and spawning alternative views have equally been identified as one of the major hallmarks of civilized society as alluded to

by Sawanti (2002) in Ojo (2006,p. 77) as a major contribution to democratic sustenance in Nigeria. The spread of new technologies according to Sawanti (2002) has come to redefine relationships between government to government on one end, and between the government and the governed at the other end. This makes information and more importantly opinion molding (Private & Public) at the mercy of a click on any of the devices which the internet provides. This has a far reaching implication for in the development of a virile political culture (Mohammed 2004, p. 469).

Closer home, it is apposite to add that the same new media platforms used by these leaders can be used for dishing out constructive criticisms and sometimes in a negative sense, disparaging accusations against policy directives of government. A case in point was the fuel subsidy removal protests of January 2012. Nigerian government's eventual bow to reversing the pump price downwards from 141 naira to 67 naira can be attributed majorly to enormous pressure mounted through the social media (facebook, twitter etc) on government. More importantly, the effect of the various social media anchored on the internet sustained the protests for more than a week, a development that is unprecedented in the annals of civil right protests in Nigeria (Amaefule, 2012). New media provided a wakeup call for political leadership at all levels to respond, albeit reluctantly. While pre-empting events especially in the western part of the country from snow-balling into what has now been dubbed "Arab spring" where according to DeLong- Bas(2015), new media singularly became a rallying point for mass mobilization.

Lastly, international relations and the entrenchment of national identities are two broad areas where developing countries have been impacted by new media technologies. This has been achieved through an acknowledgment of the relative weakness of the Nigeria nation and other developing polities in terms of the amount of access to informational resources required for combating global inequalities. Therefore issues of representation and self presentations which have been of particular significance to small developing states trying to compete for attention in cyberspace forms part of the ongoing struggle of many developing countries to combat global inequalities (Shaheed, 2004).

Conclusion and Recommendation

The complementary role which the new media and its ancillaries such as internet, websites, computer multi-media, DVDs, video games, CD-ROMs etc have come to play alongside the conventional media like radio, television and newsprints magazines cannot be over emphasized. As a member of the global community with considerable influence on the African spheres, Nigeria is expected to latch-on to the opportunity provided by new media for a continuous, seamless interaction between governments at different levels on one end and governments and the citizenry at the other end. It is expected that these interactions will engender a mutually rewarding civil engagement in addition to being hallmarks of democracy and civil rule.

Moreover, gauging the pulse of every stratum of the society towards galvanizing their opinion for policy direction of government and pooling together spontaneous reactions of the citizenry irrespective of distance, time and space are the major

features of new media. These are priceless value propositions and edge over the conventional media which new media is projected to retain for some time to come. It is against this backdrop that the United States of America's commitment to internet freedom as given effect to by the Clinton administration should be understood. Its subsequent provision of funds to bolster this vision through organized advocacy against new media censorship across the globe further affirms it (new media) as veritable tool of diplomacy and foreign relations generally (Shirky,2011).

Therefore, Nigeria as an ally of the United States of America on so many other fronts should commence a process of reviewing extant media laws in the country. This must be carefully pursued in a manner that will not portray the Nigerian government as not being attuned to its much professed democratic ethos, especially in the area of checkmating avoidable abuses by new media adherents. This is likely to forestall its use for the promotion of terrorism and other organized crime against the state and amongst the citizenry. These can be achieved by a review of existing media regulatory framework to incorporate the unfolding challenges posed by the persistent increase in new media adherents. This will have a positive effect on content generation and standardization. This is a worthy mission which the Nigerian government at the center should courageously pursue in order to set globally acceptable benchmarks for other levels of government and the citizenry at large.

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