

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON VOTERS EDUCATION IN 2023 GENERAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

USMAN Gayam Usman Ph.D¹, MUHAMMAD B. Baban-Umma² & AMINU Ibrahim Ph.D³

^{1,2&3}Department of Political Science, Nasarawa State University, Keffi-Nigeria

gayamusman@gmail.com & braaibraaameeen42@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper examines the impact of social media on voter education in general elections in Nigeria. The basic contention of this study is to reveal the problem of social media and voter's education. During the general elections conducted, there were concerted efforts by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Civil Society Groups (CSGs), Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs), to educate voters on their rights and civil responsibilities. But it was discovered that many voters were ignorant of the provisions of the Electoral Act with respect to voting procedures. This ignorance resulted to cancellation and voided many electoral results in Nigeria. Social media have brushed a motley of effects across the span of socio-economic, political and cultural concerns of the society. What has it done in the promotion of Civil and Political Rights in Nigeria during the 2023 general election? The paper employed secondary method of data collection, content analysis of data was collected from secondary sources such as the Internet, newspapers, textbooks, and journals. Structural-Functionalism theory is adopted as a theoretical underpinning for the study. Social media promoted civil and political rights in 2023 general election through platforms for electioneering, and voter education. The finding of the study reveals that voter education and media literacy empowered voters on the need to support political messages, political participation and voter education during the election campaigns in Nigeria. The study therefore recommends government should monitor the social media to avoid being wrongly used by overzealous citizens to propagate falsehood, hate speech, hatred, religion and ethnic conflict during electioneering campaign in Nigeria.

Keywords: social media, Voters, Voters Education, and Elections

INTRODUCTION

Elections and electioneering of the 21st Century politics have taken a new shade of nature at the face of the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) revolution, and the portmanteau of interconnected networks (the Internet). The revolution shrunk the once a vast world into what Marshall McLuhan calls "the global village" (McLuhan, 1964), and created a virtual society which commands formidable bearings on the physical society. The virtual society features its unique form of media christened the social media (including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, Zoom, YouTube, etc., beyond the orthodox media of the physical society such as radio, television, newspaper, and magazine. The uniqueness of the social media earned them a pride of place which is swiftly rendering the orthodox media quite anachronistic, and forcing them to establish social media presence and its enhancements for survival.

Social media are known for their freedom, relative accessibility and boundless reach. They put the powers to elicit, store and disseminate information to all and sundry with little or more technical *Ozèb, Okonkwo & Kalu* know-how. By implication, the water-tight control of what information is sent and received has been perforated. People nowadays send and receive large volumes of information from the comfort of their rooms or elsewhere, and more importantly, with little or no censorship. The social media allow white lies, half-truths, and unadulterated truths.

The electoral process is one of the bulwarks of democracy with voters as major stakeholders in the process. This is because, if the people lose confidence in the process, democracy as a system of populace participation in government will become a sham. The aim of an electoral process should be free and fair election where the candidate with the highest votes wins. However, the voters that vote during any election must know their rights and roles in making the electoral process credible. It is when the voter rights are protected during the electoral process that credible elections can be conducted, and credible and popular candidates, emerge as winners. (James and Ekanem, 2011).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media

Social media definition can be approached from technical and functional perspectives. Technically speaking, social media is “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” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Web 2.0 and User Generated Content (UGC) are the central words in the definition. Web 2.0 means the second version of World Wide Web which allows interaction between and among people; unlike the elderly Web 1.0 which was static and top-down in nature so that people are only consumers of information, and never the generators. The focus of the Web 2.0 is to create the forum for collaboration to the people for information sharing online through social media, blogging and Web-based communities (Techopedia, n.d); i.e. the ability for the people to interact. In this regard, User Generated Content is a product of the *laissez faire* ideology of the Web 2.0 technology.

The uniqueness of the Web 2.0 is enhancement for dynamic information sharing epitomized by allowing readers, unlike previously where it existed at all, to comment directly on pages. The creators of the concept, Dale Dougherty, and Tim O'Reilly (2005), differentiated between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 by listing websites and applications founded on either of the ideologies and technologies; and the list as below shows clearly that social media is indeed Web 2.0 based.

Table 1. Describing Web 2.0 by Example

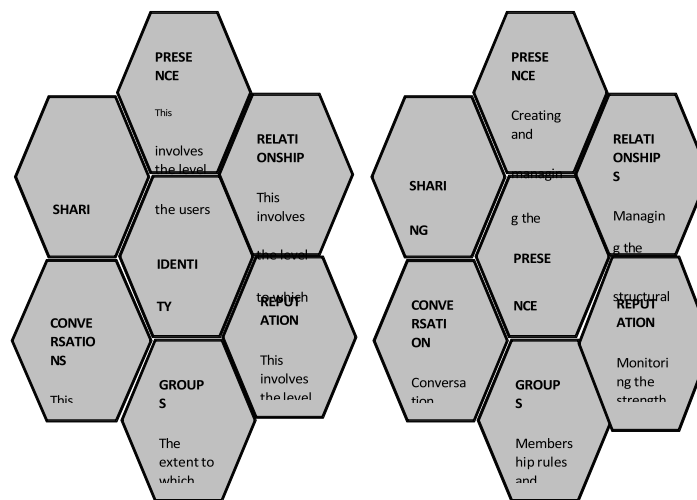
Websites under Web 1.0	Websites under Web 2.0
Ofoto	Flickr
personal websites	Blogging
Akamai	BitTorrent
mp3.com	Napster
Britannica Online	Wikipedia
page views	cost per click
DoubleClick	Google AdSense
domain name speculation	search engine optimization
directories (taxonomy)	tagging ("folksonomy")
screen scraping	web services
Stickiness	Syndication
content management systems	Wikis
Publishing	Participation
Evite	upcoming.org and EVDB

Source: O'Reilly (2005, para. 7)

From the list above, it is observable that each of the Web 1.0 websites and applications have their corresponding latest version with similar utility under Web 2.0; and that the edge which the latter websites and applications have over the former ones was their participatory nature.

Figure 1. Building Blocks of social media

Social Media Functionality Implications of the Functionality



Source: Kietzmann et al. (2011)

Functionally, social media has been described as that which “employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co- create, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (Kietzmann, Kristopher, Ian, and Bruno, 2011, p. 241). Towards a better description of social media, Kietzmann, et al (2011) also identified what he called the seven functional building blocks of social media which are: sharing, relationships, identity, conversations, reputation, groups and presence; functional building blocks which in their respective rights represent specific social media experience.

Voters' Education

Citizen-Voters' Education Campaign (2005-2009) opined that “Voters' Education is the education, which depends on the understanding of the electorates about democracy and their participative role in its practice and would ensure the broadest and effective participation in governance.” The following electoral areas will be addressed:

- iv. The perceived voter preference based on popularity and glamour rather than on the basis of platform and program.
- v. Rampant vote-buying.
- vi. Confusion, anomalies, and threats in the voting process.
- vii. Problem of popularizing the new modernizing system of election.
- viii. Continuing problem of familiarization with the party-list system.
- ix. Participation of marginalized and underrepresented sectors in the electoral process.
- x. Problem of citizens monitoring of electoral process.
- xi. Problem of citizen participation in governance and continuing engagement with the elected government; and
- xii. Clarifying the role citizens in a working democracy.

(Campaign, 2005) Waheed (2011) views “Voters' education as an enterprise to ensure that now voters are ready to participate in electoral process and to know who the best choice is beyond political, ethnic or other affiliations.” He further explained that elections are always defining moments in the history of nations, so major stakeholders of elections, i. e., voters should have sufficient education as to how, when and to whom the choice is made.

LASIEC (2011) described “Voters' Education as those practicable strategies to raise the consciousness of the electorates on their socio-political tasks of internalizing universal electoral practices and acceptable voting procedure in the country.” It added that this Voters' Education should have the following objectives:

1. Sensitizing electorates generally on voting procedure, electoral processes and other
2. Civic obligations and duties.

3. Educate the electorates against election malpractices such as hooliganism, electoral violence, ballot boxes snuffing and snatching, multiple thumb-printing and falsification of result.
4. Educate members of political parties and other major stakeholders on relevant electoral guidelines, rules and regulations, constitutional provisions and acts guiding electoral practices.
5. To enlighten the voters on the benefits and effects of democratic governance and its features such as periodic elections, universal adult suffrage, free and fair elections, independent electoral bodies, inalienable human rights, independent judiciary, free and vibrant press, etc.

Election

Election is a concept and model in political science literature. As a concept, it generally explains the literal meaning of what an election implies. As Ajiteru (2019), explains, elections are a mechanism through which politicians can be called to account and forced to introduce policies that somehow reflect public opinion. This emphasizes the bottom-up functions of elections: political recruitment, representation, making government, influencing policies, and so on. According to Sulaiman (2017), elections are defined as mechanisms through which individuals and groups of great political desire can be held to account in public office and forced to introduce policies that reflect the general will of the people. On the other hand, Abalaka (2018) states that elections are a means by which political individuals and parties can communicate with the public to gain support and legitimacy to rule. Ginsberg (1982) states that elections are a means through which the political elites can exercise control over a population. As captured by Emmanuel (2017), elections raised fundamental concerns, such as (i). The public offices were subjected to the elections (ii). The qualifications of voters and political candidates (iii) the casting of votes, and (iv) The competence of the election process as governed by fair and free principles Andrew (1997) sees elections as nothing more than the manifestation of public interest and as a means of peaceful and legitimate transfer of power in a democratic system. To Abalaka (2018), elections are the barometer to measure the political maturity, health, legitimacy, and stability of a democratic government. It is generally held to be the single most important indicator of the presence or absence of a democratic government.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopted structural-functional theory as the theoretical underpinning, the theory was propounded by Gabriel Almond and Coleman, and later, Almond and Powell in 1960s. Structural-functionalism or simply, functionalism has age-long history traceable to Aristotle. It later courted the attention of the ace sociologists and anthropologists including Emile Durkheim and Talcott Persons. Across the disciplines and ages, structural-functionalism argues that society should be understood as a system of interdependent parts. The parts (structures) perform certain functions for the system's survival. Almond and Powell (1966) argued that understanding the political system is highly dependent on understanding the structures of the political system and their functions, and in doing so, must be put in an expressive and active historical context. The structural functions as listed by Almond and Coleman (1960) are interest articulation, political socialization, political communication, interest aggregation, law making, law implementation, and law interpretation. The foremost four belong to the input side of the system while the hindmost three represent policy outputs, especially from the inputs. Political communication serves as a link between the inputs and the outputs, thus performing the function of a feedback loop. In other words, it links the society and the political system. The function of political communication is performed by the media, including social media. The legislature, executive and judiciary perform the output functions in that order. On the other hand, structures such as schools perform the function of political socialization, political parties perform the function of interest aggregation while interest and pressure although not exclusively, perform the function of interest articulation.

Structural functional theory therefore makes the role of social media in human rights promotion and protection in the 2019 Presidential election understandable. During the 2019 general election, the 14 functions of mass media which were identified by Fisher and Soemarsono (2008) were observably performed by social media with positive impacts on the civil and political rights of the citizenry, and they include: identification of problems, relaying of problems to the public, highlighting groups and their proposals, presenting policymaker's proposals, suggestions of media content, determination of the speed

of decision making, voter education, informing the public of content, describing administration, whetting the consciousness of the public, evaluating effectiveness, reacting to policy, stimulating review, and making proposals for change or termination.

A close study of the list of functions above shows the fact that there cannot be other input functions such as political socialization, interest aggregation, and interest articulation without political communication. Communication is central as it coordinates other functions. It is the life wire of the political system. As a matter of fact, without communication the political system will crash. This follows therefore to mean that all the political socialization, interest articulation, and interest aggregations in the 2019 Presidential elections were done by the instrumentality of political communication; a function performed by the media, and accordingly, assisted the citizenry in exercising their civil and political rights such as the rights franchise, freedom of assembly and expression.

Relevance of the Theory

Structural functionalism is important because it offers a framework for understanding society as a complex system where various parts (social institutions, norms, values) work together to maintain stability and solidarity, highlighting how these interconnected parts contribute to the overall functioning of society. Structural functionalism emphasizes how social structures and institutions, like family, education, and religion, contribute to maintaining social order and stability.

Key Assumption of the theory

- Every part of the society serves a particular function and that social structure work together to maintain social order.
- Structural functionalists believe that if a part of society fail to functions correctly, the system as a whole will be imparted, leading to social problems and instability.
- Society is a complex system with interdependent parts working towards stability and equilibrium, with each part serving a specific function for the whole.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is employed the used of qualitative research which involved documentary method of gathering data from secondary sources from archival records of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and Political Parties archives official report from books, Journals, Magazines, Newspapers, publications, internet materials, thesis, dissertations, and other periodic reports were consulted from various library and center of documentation. These include; Nasarawa State University Library, State Library, Post-Graduate Library, Political Science and Social Science Faculty Library. Content analysis were used in this article. the literature is practically thematic relevant to the impact of social media and voters' education in 2023 general election in Nigeria.

Voting Rights (Franchise or Suffrage)

Voting is a vital mechanism of election and is the fundamental civic right and this right is granted through the principle of Universal Adult Suffrage. It also falls under "Human Rights" which provides the "Human to Democracy", which is contained in "Article 21" of the United Nations" Charter on human rights.

Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representations. Everyone has the right to equal access to public service in his country. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures. In Nigeria the constitutional right to vote for every Nigerian citizen who has attained the age of eighteen (18) years are contained in sections and Subsections of 77 (2); 117 (2), 132 (5) and 178 (5). This right exists as embodied in the universal declaration of human right and the entire body of international human rights law. (James and Ekanem, 2011).

According to Oyeneye, Onyenwenu and Olosunde (2002), Suffrage or franchise “is the right of adult citizens of a nation to vote in an election.” In every country, there is always an electoral law, which stipulates the qualification of electors and those to be elected. The process of enfranchisement is therefore the way each citizen fulfils the conditions of laws that make him/her eligible as a voter.

Voting rights are usually fought for, because they are not always extended to all citizens of a country. In Nigeria, the right to vote was developed from the colonial period during which elections in Lagos and Calabar were based on property, educational qualifications, and the social status of citizens (Oyeneye, Onyenwenu and Olosunde, 2002). These criteria determined those who could vote and be voted for. Increasingly, the base for franchise was broadened to accommodate all qualified adult citizens. i. e., universal franchise.

Voters’ Education and Credible Elections

Experience has shown that the true test of democracy is the ability to conduct free and fair election, and this partly premised on the competence of Election Managers charged with this responsibility. In addition, the roles of electorates in any given environment cannot be over-emphasized in view of their domineering number in the electoral process.

It has been widely posited that the quest for credible election in the country today could best be achieved through the attitudinal change of the electorates. Aside the capacity of the Electoral body to deliver, voters need to have positive perception and right orientation about the inalienable roles expected of them if democracy in Nigeria is to stabilize. This task can only be best achieved through thorough and apt Voters’ Education (LASIEC, 2011).

Voters’ Education promotes meaningful participation of citizens in the electoral and political processes, and in enhancing the credibility of the whole process {citizen-Voters’ Education Campaign (2005-2009). Voters’ Education calls for the political culture and the political awareness of the political parties, candidates, and most importantly the electorates. The education of voters with an overhaul of electoral and political structures, processes, policies, and mechanisms tends to evolve around the primacy of party platforms and programs rather than personalities and enhances people’s democratic participation in both the electoral process and in governance. In essence, it will lead to the development of a politically mature and critical electorate conversant with the processes and requirements of a full-fledged democracy.

Uwais in Ayanruoh (2011) added that representative government can be effective in Nigeria if its citizenry can hold it accountable for its actions and by their obligation to participate in the fundamental processes of democracy, such as developing an understanding of how democratic government functions, going to the polls to vote and by being attentive to the public issues that have an impact on our national life though ample Voters’ Education.

Voters’ Education helps in enlightening the electorates through acquainting them with an electoral system that will offer voters a choice of candidates and parties rather than just a choice of party lists in elections (Uwais in Ayanruoh, 2011).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the impact of social media on elections campaigns and voter education in Nigeria is profound and multifaceted. While social media enhances political communication, campaign mobilization, voter engagement, and voters’ education, it also presents challenges such as the proliferation of disinformation and misinformation. As Nigeria continues to navigate its democratic journey, stakeholders must prioritize efforts to harness the potential of social media for promoting transparent, inclusive, and fair elections.

- Government should liaise with service providers to make the interment usage cheaper and more affordable to encourage more citizens on voters’ education and political participation during general elections in Nigeria.

- Government should also monitor the social media to avoid being wrongly used by overzealous citizens to propagate falsehood, hate speech, hatred, religion and ethnic conflict during electioneering campaign in Nigeria.
- Government should enhance voter education and media literacy to empower voters on the need to support political messages, political participation and voter education during the election campaigns Nigeria.
- Government should encourage youths to maintain and enhance their levels of political participation, recognizing that meaningful change takes time, and collective efforts, both on social media and voters' education may yield effective in the political process overtime

References

- Abalaka, J. N. (2018). *Social media, definition and classes of*. In K. Harvey (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social media and politics*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage
- Ajiteru, S. A. R. (2019). *The variable nature of news media influence*, *Communication Yearbook* 2. New Brunswick.
- Almond, G. A., & Powell, G. B., Jr. (1966). *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach*, Boston: Little, Brown.
- Fisher, J.R. & Soemarsono, A. (2008). Mass media impact on post-secondary policy making: A case study of a failed merger attempt. *Competition Forum*, 6(1), 96-102.
- James, E. & Ekenam, S.A. (2011). Voter Rights and Credible Election in Nigeria: The Imperative of Re-thinking the Content of Citizenship Education.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53 (1), 59—68.
- Kietzmann, Jan H., Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy and Bruno S. Silvestre (2011). Social Media? Get serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media. *Business Horizons* 54(3): 241- 251.
- LASIEC (Lagos State Independent Electoral, 2011) Local Government Election Petition Time limit for determination of Lifeline available to a Petitioner, In the Local Government Election Petition Appeal Tribunal of Lagos State.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: Mentor.
- Oyeneye, I., Onyenwenu, M. and Olosunde, E.B. (2002). Round-Up Government for Senior Secondary Certificate Examination. Lagos: Longman Nigeria Plc.
- O'Reilly, T. (2005). What is Web 2.0? Accessed online from <https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html>
- Sulaiman T. H, (2017). *Mass communication theory: Foundations, ferment and future*. (6 Ed.). Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Techopedia (n.d). “Definition - What does Web 2.0 mean?” Accessed online from <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/4922/web-20>
- Waheed, K. (2011). Voters' Education. The Issues and Challenges. *Foresight Africa: Top Priorities for the Continent in 2011*;3–7