

Impact of Social Media on Political Awareness: A Case Study of Ilaro Youths Olubukola Fakeye

Department of Mass Communication, The Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Ogun State, Nigeria
olubukola.fakeye@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng

Abstract

A deluge of social networking sites, now ably comported in various multimedia applications and programmes, are an apt conduit for mass communication today. Apart from being accessible to the majority in this contemporary age, these networking apps, fondly called social media are a convener of widely dispersed homogeneous, heterogeneous, and interactive audience. Since opinions can now be projected through these media, opinion moulders now freely share their views on several activities of the government and its agencies, discussing and contributing to topical issues of general interests. Because the process of determining what constitute the public opinion requires a free for all avenue where all can participate without interference, the available media in use become the cynosure of the umpire of fairness. This paper presents how the social media is impacting the level of political enlightenment in terms of political awareness of youths, using Ilaro, a border town in Ogun, from where 396 sample was chosen for the study. The research work adopted survey research design to elicit responses concerning the contributions of social media in fostering political participation of 396 youths in 7 political wards in Ilaro. Data gathered from the study showed that the youths in the town are active political commentators on social media and are informed about the politics of the land and nation on major topics online and offline. The study recommends responsible use of social media by the youth so as to engender dissentient views that may serve as a checkmate against unprofitable or complacent popular opinions, which is necessary for every democracy.

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Introduction

There has been compelling need for the mainstream media to pace up along on the current terrain of mass communication afforded by the emergence of the Internet. McLuhan (1958) prognosticated that the world was shrinking in time and space, when he coined the phrase – global village. The boom of internet in 21st century has brought an ineluctable demand for change in the perspectives and mode of communications. The business of media-mediated communication has gone beyond the analogue era, and is currently at a fine digital sophistication level in

advanced countries, and in many developing countries of the world, courtesy of the internet.

Fidler (2007) gave the coinage – *mediamorphose*; that for conventional media to remain relevant, they needed to take advantage of the internet to meet the needs of the virtual audience in the global village. Many conventional media platforms around the world have keyed into this concept and are making more presence online via social media platforms than in terrestrial media. With ownership of a smartphone, the global space is converged in a man's palm; besides having access to news across international

borders, social media have made audience participation in news process more lucid than before, as viral trends on social media now set agenda, not just for the media, but also for governance.

It becomes imperative for media content developers to navigate along the new media in their content generation and broadcast. Thus, the mediamorphosing of *Punch* newspaper to punchonline.com, of CNN screen station to twitter.com/cnn, of raypower 100.5 fm to facebook.com/raypower100.5, of Channels TV on UHF39 to youtube.com/channelstv and /https://www.channelstv.com etc. Social media, built with immediate feedback mechanism thus portends to accentuate participation of the audience more than ever before.

Malaspina (2013) noted that an Italian political party, Five Star Movement, launched its debut in politics in 2013 employing “social media as the primary medium of communication, recruitment and organization, and has been regarded as a phenomenon, with its programmatic and ideological discovery of the web, blogs and social media in forming, building and maintaining public opinion, and offering data that could be used to monitor changes in political preferences

Nnanyelugo & Adibe (2013) observed that:

“The arrival of social media has greatly enhanced all aspects of human communication. The new technology due to the participatory, interactive and cost-effective nature has barely made everyone who can use it a mass communicator.”

On 12th of April, 2015, Hillary Clinton announced ‘I’m running for President’ in a casual two minutes video shared on twitter and it went viral online before it paved it way into the mainstream media. Most followers on social media are wont to judge their follows through the strength they exhibit, and warmth

they exude which make them lovely and admirable to their online followers. The sense of closeness that people feel on social media when they get information directly from their followers is responsible for the adoption of social media in Public Relations. Hence, walls of mediating agencies are daily going down as media relation is being personalized by many public figures, mostly politicians, through their *twitter* handles, *facebook* accounts, and blogs. Nigeria’s presidency, NASS, EFCC, Jagaban/BATIFIED Movements on twitter, Obidents/OBIDATTI movement on twitter, are a few that have validated the essence and importance of social media as a vital grassroot media that afford the online audience the benefits of: (1) Accessing the information within the shortest spate of time possible; (2) Vocalizing their opinions instantly in the absence of any gate-keepers; (3) Sharing such information with their followers virally to curry interests.

Papacharissi (2009) described the entrance of a social media as:

“virtual sphere, in which citizen-consumers participate and express dissent with a public agenda...by expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting comment in an online discussion group”

Government and its agencies, politicians and policy makers through social media can now sample public opinions without much effort. They also obtain instantaneous reactions/responses on their various moves. Social media handlers for various entities now sample public opinions using twitter polls technique, while also disseminating important messages which often go viral though re-tweets, comments and likes.

World Health Organization in its Community-Based Rehabilitation Guidelines published in 2010 summed that political awareness is a necessity for ensuring informed participation of the citizenry of a constituent. It transcends the surface-scratch periodic buzz of electioneering campaigns and gimmicks. Some have suggested that political

awareness is the sensitivity of the people to public policies, and the agendas driving politicians. It is the knowledge and understanding of a social system and the subsystems that make it up.

Nigeria has evolved out of series of chilling militarization through fledgling representative governance, all of which still have impact on her democracy. The portrayal of President Muhammadu Buhari unrepentant dictator by certain media outlets which refer to him as General Muhammadu Buhari, perception of the 8th Republic of Nigeria as being undemocratic probably because of the headship – Buhari, by some social commentators, clarion call for local government autonomy, the demand by state governors to take custody of federal roads in their states, and recent clamour for restructuring and self-determination movements in eastern and western Nigeria are a few ripples rocking the ship of Nigeria's democracy that demand thorough education of the public to ascertain informed contributions towards all-encompassing policy formulation.

Collective participation of informed majority and minority groups is a desideratum of a functional democracy. While the government of the day enjoys popularity amongst the majority, the dissentient views and criticisms from the minority serve as the necessary opposition to keep the reigning government on track.

The kernel of this paper is to measure the level of sensitivity of the Nigerian franchised age grades towards the politics of the day in relation to the influence of social media networks; basically to measure how social media engender political participation of the Ilaro youth in their local and national politics.

This study is based in a metropolitan border town, Ilaro, the capital of Yewa south LGA, in Ogun State. Currently, political activities seem to be at its peak in Ilaro as 2023 general elections draw nigh. Ilaro (Yewa South LGA) being the political headquarters of Yewa land and the territory of the Paramount Ruler of Yewa Land is currently has drawn attention to

itself through the emergence of a political albertross that just emerged to contest for senatorial seat of the political zone. According to wikipedia, Ilaro's population as is 57,850.

Akinyetun (2022) in a study considered the correlation between and among social media, political participation and efficacy of Nigerian Politics. The study sampled 3,407 respondents in Nigerian male-dominated virtual space. The study revealed significant correlations between and among the three variables – social media, political participation and political efficacy. However, less emphasis was placed on the degree of freedom of speech enjoyed by the respondents in vocalizing their opinions on social media where unpopular sponsored campaigns often overwhelm the true public opinion in a play out of spiral of silence.

Adeniyi (2023) in his study – social media as catalyst for political participation, using secondary data from Afrobarometer index to explain the the relationship between news readership on social media and civic engagement and political participation. Using secondary data from Afrobarometer index, the study explained Nigerian youths are more likely to get news via social media, which has the mechanism to enhance their civic engagement and political participation. The study maintains informed citizenry would guarantee knowledge to empower the citizen to be active in the politics of their nation. However, the study revealed that the majority of the youths who get political information through their smart phones are also the age cohort less likely to vote.

Jurgen Habermas' Concept of Public Sphere

This study hinges mainly on Jurgen Habermas' concept of public sphere. Habermas defines public sphere as "a virtual or imaginary community which does not necessarily exist in any identifiable space" Habermas 1962, p.168. It is an area in social life where individuals can come together to freely discuss and identify societal problems, and through that discussion influence political action. It is noteworthy to point out that the essential and virile platform for a

democracy to thrive is the presence of a viable public sphere that will guarantee collective participation of every sane individual in the politics of their state; for a democracy to be participatory, it must maintain social mechanisms through which public policies would be derivatives of public opinions.

Habermas' conceptualization of public sphere is based on four requisites, viz; (1) The formation of public opinion; (2) All citizens have access; (3) Conference in unrestricted fashion (based on the freedom of assembly, the freedom of association, the freedom to expression and publication of opinion, about matters of general interest, which implies freedom from economic and political control; (4) Debate over the general rules governing relations. (Habermas, 1962).

Access to the conventional media: Nigeria has a prided history of nationalists' movement who used the media to wrestle governance from the colonialists. This was a period of social activism that newspapers were used by the politically-inclined leaders to curry the support of the masses for self and indigenous governance. The tactics worked, and their various feats are festooned on Nigeria's Journalism history. However, there was a short fall of informed contributions from the quarters of the masses other than mass mobilization for goal achievement, which was mainly grasping of power from the whites. The Nationalist leaders' voices overwhelmed the necessary contributions of possible dissents that could have been of value to true representativeness. Yesteryear's Nationalists' papers are being accused of slanted reportage that favour the political leanings of their publishers. Still apparent in this dispensation is obnoxious media ownership influences that percolates media contents of various media outlets whose owners/sponsors have political yearnings of some kinds. This is antithetical to habermas' conception and description of public sphere cited by Amos, 2008, that "it is an arena, independent of government (even if in receipt of state funds) and also enjoying autonomy from partisan economic forces, which is dedicated to rational debate (i.e to debate and

discussion which is not interests disguised or 'manipulated' and which is both accessible to entry and open to inspection by the citizenry. It is here, in this public sphere, that the public opinion is formed)" (Amos, 2008)

The menace of obnoxious media ownership influence created a schism between the mainstream media and the masses. The conventional media were just mere mouthpieces of their owners, who exert much power to dispel dissentient views that do not conform into their ideologues through gatekeeping. However, the social media networks is seen as a respite since its inception, and has lived up to the task so far in many climes, i.e., social media users freely express their dissatisfactions against government and many go ahead to mount up campaigns for their preferred political candidates, campaigns against oppositions and go viral without barriers of censorship.

Elizabeth Noelle Neumann's Spiral of Silence

The Spiral of Silence theory was developed in 1970s by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann to contextualize the political activities of the post – World War II in Germany. To Noelle-Neumann,

"people live in perpetual fear of isolating themselves and carefully observe their environment to see which opinions increase and which ones decrease. If they find they find that their views predominate or increase, and then they express themselves freely in public; if they find that their views are losing support, and then they become fearful, conceal their convictions in the public and fall silent. Because one group express themselves with self-confidence, whereas the others remain silent, the former appear to be strong in public, the latter weaker than their numbers suggest. This encourages other to express themselves or to fall silent, and a spiral process comes into play".

The theory suggests that the expression and formation of public opinion results from people's perception of the climate of opinion (Yun & Park, 2011).

Spiral of silence presupposes that, apart from the five sense organs – skin, eye, ear, tongue, and nose, humans possess a quasi-statistical organ - a sixth sense that tallies up information about what society in general is thinking and feeling. The theory underpins the human tendency to remain silent when they feel that their views are not in tandem with the perceived majority opinion. The fear of expressing freely their opinions on public matters in the public domain is hinged on majorly two insecurities; fear of isolation when the group or public realizes that the individual has a divergent opinion from the status quo, and fear of reprisal or more extreme isolation, in the sense that voicing an opinion might lead to a negative consequence beyond that of mere isolation (loss of a job, status, confidence, etc.).

The theory is relevant to the study in that the whole essence of opinion sharing and political awareness pivots around the fulcrum of prevailing energies

stemming from cultural values, religious considerations, and political affiliations at various levels in our system and subsystems. Because humans, naturally, crave associations and acceptance, we tend to sacrifice a part of us that do not conform to those companies we aspire to belong.

Methodology

The study adopted survey method using 400 sample chosen from the seven political wards in Ilaro, with a quota of fifty seven (57) respondents per ward, except ward 1, which has 58 respondents. Convenience sampling technique was used in selecting respondents from each political wards. Structured questionnaire was developed and randomly administered to the respondents in each ward, of which 396 were returned by the respondents; an experimental mortality of four (4) was recorded. Therefore, the analysis was based on the 396 questionnaire.

Table 1: Age Distributions of Respondents

Age(yrs)	18-30	31-45	46-Upward
Freq.	183(46.2%)	190(48%)	23(5.8%)

From table 1, 46.2% are puerly youth, and 48% are quite youthful. Only 5.8 are above 45 years old

Table 2 above shows 5.6% of the 396 respondents are not free to air their opinions online, while 29.3% are free, 35.6% are very free and 29.5% claime to be extremely free voicing their opinions online.

Table 2: Respondents' Uses of and Dispositions to Social Media for Political Discourse:

	Never	Rarely	Few times	Most Times	Always
Comment about politics on SM?	86(21.7%)	133(33.6%)	87(22%)	84(21.2%)	6(1.5%)
Ever been bullied on SM?	189(47.7%)	55(13.9%)	77(19.4%)	40(10.1%)	35(8.8%)
Read News on SM	0(0.0%)	47(11.9%)		152(38.4%)	151(38.1%)
Share news links on SM	82(20.7%)	107(27%)	81(20.5%)	95(24%)	31(7.8%)

The table 2 shows 21.7% do not dabble into politics online, while 55.6% rarely do, while 22.7% are always

interested in political discourse online. The table also shows 47.7% of the respondents were never being

bullied on social media, while 13.9% and 19.4% attested to have been rarely or in few times, bullied. 18.9% claimed to get bullied always. 76.5% of the respondents source news on social media accessed

from their mobile phones, and 31.8% of them share news links regarding politics with their family and friends.

Table 3: Respondents’ Choices of News Medium

Hardcopy Newspaper	Social Media (Mobile)	TV	Radio
66(16.7%)	233(58.8%)	41(10.4%)	56(14.1%)

Table 3 shows 58.8% get news from social media, while 16.7% read hardcopy newspaper and 24.5% access news via broadcast media

Discussion of Findings

The study investigates contributions of social media towards enhancing participatory democracy with a focus on the youths in Ilaro, Yewa South, SW, Ogun State, Nigeria. The research revealed social media is a major contributor to engender the participation of the youth in politics. Findings revealed political awareness amongst majority is mainly fostered by their exposure to online social interactive media. They are mostly found with the multimedia gadgets which enable them to connect with the larger world beyond the boundary of the township.

In order to know whether social media networks make any significant contributions to political participation of the youths in Ilaro town, a respondent in her assessment of social media as a teeming cybertribalism tool in this country, pointed out that blogging appeared from God knows where ...makes it easier to get a message across to Nigerians than to announce it on the dailies. This claim is supported by the high number of respondents who source news and comment on political news via many platforms on their mobile phones. The social media can be likened to the Public Address System in a gathering of people with common interest and to peacefully co-exist. Also, as enunciated by Kim & Hen (2016), exposure to congruent perspectives with those of the audience would enhance frequent adoption of the media through which the perspectives are expressed. This

notion is supported by the influx of the youth on social media where they are free to express their political differences and follow like-minds to chart their political causes. Whereas, the mainstream media have been said to be failing in this regards when they give credence to political inclinations of their proprietors in their reportage, thereby affecting the public image as unbiased umpires.

Regarding the freedom of expression enjoyed on social media by the youth, 47.7% claimed to have never been bullied online, while only 8.8% attested to get bullied everytime they express dissenting views online. This shows that majority of the online users in Ilaro have access to air their views without recourse to bullies. This also suggests that majority of the youths, as gleaned from the analysis, are active on political matters as well as other contemporary social and religious matters and their level of sensitization is proportionate to their media exposure, which is mainly constituted by online media.

Summary

The study analyzed impact of social media on the overall political awareness cum participation of 396 sampled youths in Ilaro, Yewa South of Ogun State. The study, which is predicated on Jurgen Habermas’ concept of Public Sphere and Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann’s Spiral of Silence, established a significant correlation between Social media and the level of political awareness of the town’s youths. The study also attempted a comparison of the conventional media with the spiraling social media. It is observed that more people are wont to source information

online (which consists in social media and networking sites) because of convenience, affordability, interactiveness (warm and strength). Many conventional media outlets are going virtual as well by syndicating their contents on most used social media networks. With this, the conventional media have also become interactive and viral through their online presence. The plurality and popularity of social media mobile applications has, thus, given fillip to political awareness of youths in terms of their participations on political discourses that generate reactions and interactions on the online communities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The emergence of social media in the mass communication business has ushered in many feats that were hitherto unachievable. The instantaneous feedback mechanism and the power now borne by the audience to dictate the agendas, not just for the media, but for policymakers and the governance across international body has earned social media more respect by all and sundry. Now, focuses of governments, multinationals bodies and agencies have shifted to social media as either wild beast to tame, or mascot to leverage.

For the fairer public sphere made possible by the emergence of the social media networks not to be asphyxiated by the mechanism of the law being employed by legislators, media content developers should always endeavor to employ both profession and ethics of journalism in their online media to entrench system of responsible journalism online that will foster astute politically informed citizenry.

Online media hosts should set up chains of comment assessors to gate-keep comments found untoward to the practice of journalism or treasonable.

Issues revolving around libel, slander, and defamation do not require special promulgations; they are all captured in cybercrime act in Nigerian constitution. Rather than trying to scuttle the freedom of speech through complications of the law, Nigerian legislators should adopt necessary social media to make the plenary as public as possible and grant the

citizenry avenue to have direct inputs in the legislation that affect them. This can be done by conducting twitter polls to sample public opinions on various bills tabled at the NASS.

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