

Appraising the Effects of Social Media Information during the Electioneering Period in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT:

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Information is very essential especially during election period that is why candidates and voters utilize it to spread information because of how viable it is in circulating information. The study sought amongst others to examine the effects; negative or positive of social media information circulation in an election period in Nigeria. It was anchored on the Mediatization of politics theory. The descriptive survey research design was used in this investigation. The residents of Owerri metropolis constitute the population of this study. The multistage sampling technique was used. Copies of questionnaire were given out to residents of Owerri Metropolis. The researchers purposefully selected two communities each from local government areas that make up the Owerri metropolis. It was revealed that many of the respondents with a mean average of 2.7 agrees that different social media outlet within their reach and beyond plays key roles in the journey of a smooth, people oriented and positive driven transition of power during and after elections ensuring that the country does not go haywire because of political differences. It was recommended that media role as an advocate of the people in the quest for peaceful pre and post-election period in Nigeria as such should transcend to personal social media users.

Introduction

Election is an integral component of democratic framework of any functional society if properly utilised, tend to produce positive socio-economic and political development (Jumbo et al., 2022; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Credible elections put the right people in government, manage conflict effectively and allocate resources efficiently. Credible elections are necessary to stem the tide of political decay and renewal in the country (Nwamara & Etumnu, 2022; Erubami, 2020).

This is because in the view of apologists of liberal democracy, once elections are gotten right, democracy is on its way to being consolidated and in consequence enduring peace and security will be instituted in the country. In essence, credible elections produce security, development and political stability (Manning, 2019).

Different media outlets, channels and tools have been used judiciously and maliciously in pursuit for power amongst competing electoral candidates of all levels both in the local government level, state government level and even federal level in Nigeria and beyond (Zhang et al., 2020). Many states and countries of the world have embraced the tools of media in communicating and reach intended electorate with campaign promises, trying to sell themselves better than the next person; with enticing messages, capturing jingles and commercials in different media stations in and outside their constituencies. The media stands at the center and front row in the quest for power and reach of electorate (Zucker, 2018).

Different media channels exist and some as old as humanity ranging from the trade media which comprises townhall meetings, town criers, gongs, drums, market square meetings and so on; down to the broadcast media which comprises radio, television; the print media that is the newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and so on and currently the social media platform with a recorded amount of wider reach and access (Zucker, 2018).

The social media and its platform is a force to reckon in every society and its activities. When Marshall McLuhan was talking about a global village, it leaves no doubts in the eyes of the communication gurus that indeed he was referring to the era of social media (Africa Practice, 2014). Social media influence cuts across basically all aspects of everyday human living and activities, ranging from education, physical fitness, information, socialisation, and so on down to the affairs of the states and government; that is the everyday running and activities of government (Macaulay et al., 2021; Ajiteru, 2019). It is no news that many government officials, parastatal, establishment have official social media handles in virtually all active social media operative in their countries such as Facebook, X (formerly twitter), Instagram, LinkedIn and so on, creating an interactive platform with the public and debunking any trace of misinformation and disinformation circulating with regards to their activities (Akinmiju, 2023). Hence, this study sought to assess the effects of social media information in an election period in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Social media influences cut across all aspects of human living and as such occupy a high rank in the unquenchable thirst for knowledge, update and information by man. With high rate of usage, different activities of government, international bodies, NGOs are relatively online connecting a large heterogeneous audience breaking the barriers of space and time, easing modus operandi and ensuring that vital and necessary information are been passed along simultaneously to all parties involved. If social media can influence government operation and everyday operations of the activities of government, what stops it then from influencing the choice of leaders the people make? What then is the place of social media before, during and after elections processes in Nigeria? Do they serve as a tool of unity or division? Are the people safe in trusting messages from different social media platforms with regards to election related matters or should the mantra “do not believe everything you see on social media” a reality? How can the people regulate and filter social media messages and contents before, during and after elections?

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following questions;

1. What are the negative or positive effects of social media information circulation in an election period in Nigeria?
2. What are the roles of social media information dispatchers in election period in Nigeria?
3. What are the impacts of uncensored and unverified information passed across social media platforms during election period in Nigeria?
4. How can the negative effects of wrong and misguided information circulated during election period in Nigeria be managed?

Literature Review

Social Media in Politics; An Overview

Like other nations, Nigeria has benefited from the new media revolution in terms of greater resources, increased technological production, and higher-quality output (Dunu & Oraka, 2004). According to Kur and Melladu (2007), the media revolution appears to be gaining traction in Nigeria's political landscape. It is arguable that social media technologies have enhanced political

communication processes in Nigeria and elsewhere (Nwabueze & Ezebuenyi, 2012). During the election process, Nigerians of different ages, educational backgrounds, and geographic locations used social media platforms (Okoro et al., 2019; Asuni & Farris, 2011). The reliance on godfatherism is gradually being replaced by political parties' strategic online crafting of campaign messages and festering of propaganda in order to purposefully compel Nigerian voters to support candidates on various social media platforms, including X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, and Youtube, respectively (Ezebuenyi & Ejezieh, 2012).

Social media has altered the way that information is currently disseminated in Nigeria. People can now interact with "others" who have different political philosophies across group boundaries due to social media's accessibility, affordability, and potential for anonymity (Etumnu, 2020; Asuni & Farris, 2011). According to Ikem (2011), social media may be a valuable instrument in politics for mobilizing support, rallying it, and igniting debate. Social media is unquestionably important to the Nigerian election process. Social media, for example, can be used to create an online and offline support base for political candidates as well as to facilitate a thought-provoking debate regarding the platforms, ideologies, and vision of such parties. By streaming political events like rallies and party conventions, it also helps to encourage virtual and remote political engagement.

Politicians' reliance on traditional media during political campaigns cannot be entirely disregarded, although social media plays a critical role in reaching a sizable audience (Ikem, 2011). Leaders of today need to comprehend how technology affects society and politics. In other words, students need to understand how social media may be used for political and governmental advancement in order to increase voter participation in the electoral process. According to Nkala (2012), social media has played a diverse role in the global transformation of political, economic, social, and cultural interactions and societies, owing to the spread of the internet. All facets of human endeavor are already being revolutionized by this development's spread, and the electoral process is not an exception. Solitary actors with shared objectives are increasingly using online tools to communicate, plan, share, discuss, orient, and organize as social networking technologies grow in popularity (Nwabueze & Ejezieh, 2012).

Empirical Review

Sulaiman et al. (2017) in their study came to reasonable conclusion that although social media influenced youths' choice of political candidate and party this was not a guarantee of voting preferences by the youths during election because ownership of any social media account does not guaranty total support. Emmanuel (2017) in a study reported that almost all political parties utilise social media platforms in campaign process and advancement of set plans, messages, and manifestos to supporters, including advertising, mobilisation and organising, and down to fundraising. In a study, Abalaka (2018) found that social media has grown to be an extremely potent tool for swaying voters' judgments. Many people who had previously supported a party or a candidate started to have second thoughts about them after reading or hearing certain things online. Similar to this, Ajiteru (2019) found that many voters now use social media platforms to obtain information, discuss the material they find there, and provide feedback, thoughts, and expectations for the party and the candidate before, during, and after elections.

Theoretical Framework

The Mediatization of Politics hypothesis served as the foundation for this investigation. Kent Aspon first proposed it in 1974. According to Kepplinger (2003), the media's unique worldview is claimed to be having a lasting impact on politics through a process of long-term change known as the "mediatisation of politics theory." As the media emerges as the primary information source on politics and society, gains independence from social and political institutions, and increasingly follows a media narrative rather than a political one when covering politics, politicians' public relations campaigns will be increasingly shaped by media institutions' logic, which will also eventually supplant political institutions as sources of policy. This theory is relevant to the study because it encloses the ideology that media irrespective of its genre in politics cannot be overlooked and should be considered key players in the realm of political power thrust ensuring that verifiable, vital and correct information are released to the public with regards to government, elections and political activities in the state.

Method

The descriptive survey research design was used in this investigation. The residents of Owerri metropolis constitute the population of this study, and according to the World Population Review (2023) data bank, the population of Owerri is projected to be 983,352. Wimmer and Dominick's online sample size calculator was used to determine a sample size of 384 with a 95% confidence level and a 5% error limit. Utilising the multistage sample technique, copies of the questionnaire were given out to residents of Owerri Metropolis in Imo State. Owerri, which is a cluster, has already been separated into three areas: Owerri North, Owerri West, and Owerri Municipal. Two communities from each local government area were purposefully chosen. The researchers purposefully selected two communities each from local government areas that made up the Owerri metropolis, this was because these communities were considered politically active as at the time of the election based on the Imo State elections, and also with the heavy presence of social media users and urban nature of the selected communities, it was ideal for the study. They are Owerri North (okigwe and Orji), Owerri West (Orogwe and Oguwgo), and Owerri Municipal (Umuoyima and Umuororonjo). The researchers at random distributed the questionnaire proportionately to residents of each community ($384/6 = 64$). The researchers purposefully distributed 64 copies of the questionnaire to respondents in these communities. In this investigation, a self-developed questionnaire was used to collect data. After the collection of the copies of questionnaire, 368 were found valid for the analysis. The other 16 copies of the questionnaire which represent 4% were not returned hence the researchers made use of the returned 368 copies of questionnaire which represent 96%.

Result and Discussion

Table 1: What are the negative or positive effects of social media information circulation in an election period in Nigeria?

Item Statements	Yes	No	Can't say
Social media encouraged positive voting attitude	123 (33.4%)	83 (22.6%)	162(44.1%)
Social media was a key instigator of tribal feud during elections	184(50%)	82(22.3%)	102(28.1%)
Social media serves as an orientation and reorientation tools towards political participation	149(40.4%)	91(24.8%)	128(34.8%)
Social media misinformed and mislead many with regards to election activities	169(45.8%)	89(24.2%)	110(28.8%)

Source; field survey, 2023

From analysis of the table above, the respondents were quite candid with regards to the place of social media in elections either positive or negative and a tilt towards the negative contribution of the media before, during and after elections as many individuals who are from different tribes supporting different political parties and candidates often disagree with individuals with an opposing views and opinions.

Table 2: What are the roles of social media information dispatchers in election period in Nigeria?

Item Statements	SD	D	A	SA	M	Decision
Social media is charged with directing voting attitude of users	61(16.6)	63(17.2)	82(22.3)	162(44.1)	2.9	2.7
Social media was a key mediator of peace during elections periods	64(17.4)	168(45.6)	52(14.2)	84(22.8)	2.4	Accept
Social media serves as an tool of deliberation and opinion polls during election periods	39(10.6)	81(22.1)	138(37.5)	110(29.9)	2.8	
Social media are charged with release of verifiable information with regards to election activities	69(18.8)	79(21.4)	126(34.3)	94(25.6)	2.7	

Source; field survey, 2023

The media role as an advocate of the people in the quest for peaceful pre and post-election period in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized as many of the respondents with a mean average of 2.7 agrees that different social media outlet within their reach and beyond play key roles in the journey of a smooth, people oriented and positive driven transition of power during and after elections ensuring that the country does not go haywire because of political differences.

Table 3: What are the impacts of uncensored and unverified information passed across social media platforms during election period in Nigeria?

Item Statements	S A	A	SD	D	M	Decision
Corporate social responsibility duties	141(38.4)	88(23.8)	71(18.3)	68(18.4)	2.8	2.9
Tribal and ethnicity wars	167(46.1)	96(26.2)	48(13.1)	57(15.5)	3.0	Accept
Chaos and delinquency amongst users	199(54.1)	76(20.6)	26(7.1)	67(18.2)	3.1	
Mis and disinformation spread	189(51.4)	75(20.4)	45(12.2)	59(16.1)	3.0	

Source; field survey, 2023

From analysis of the above table, and a mean analysis of 2.9, the researcher accepts the notion that the impact of uncensored and unverified information passed across social media platforms during election period in Nigeria is quite very heart wrecking leaving in its trails a lot of negativities that contributes negatively to the unity and peace of the country.

Table 4: How can the negative effects of wrong and misguided information circulated during election period in Nigeria be managed?

Item Statements	SA	A	SD	D	M	Decision
Unbiased analysis of political events	131(35.6)	98(26.6)	61(16.6)	78(21.2)	2.7	2.9
Verify before posting	177(48.1)	86(23.4)	68(18.4)	47(12.8)	3.2	Accept
Don't be in a haste to pass judgment or criticize	189(51.4)	86((23.4)	46(12.6)	47((12.8)	3.1	
Be open minded and cautious of information	169(46.1)	85(23.1)	45(12.3)	69(18.8)	2.9	

Source; field survey, 2023

From analysis of the above table, and a mean analysis of 2.9, the researcher accepts the notion that although other ways and measures exist that can be as a control measure for managing the negative effects of wrong and misguided information circulated during election period in Nigeria, efforts should be made that political life outside social media should not differ from what is presented by the candidates and parties on social media and the users of populace should stand on the place of truth, fairness and equity when standing in as judge and jury with regards to political issues.

Discussion

The media which is regarded as the fourth estate of the realm and the fourth arm of government stands as a tool for public checkmate for the authorities that be. The tools of the media both electronic, print and new media occupy an irreversible position in the affairs of the states and daily happenings of the populace. Media in politics is not a new trend or a phase in social occurrences but the oldest form of government checkmate tools from town criers to village meetings to newsletters to television and radio broadcasting now to social media era. With regards to the study, the effects of social media in politics especially during and after elections in Nigeria is a force to reckon with as a major percentage of the populace visit these media sites to gather information, lobby for preferred voters and so on, as such political parties and candidates should be careful of information circulated across social media platforms and the populace should confirm and verify media messages before swallowing media contents hook, line and sinker. This is in line with a study by Abalaka, (2018) which revealed that social media have become so powerful to influence voter's decisions and choices, as many voters preferred candidates or parties began to

change their minds based on certain information or ideas sourced online about the party or candidate in question.

Media in the society is held in high esteem by the populace as they serve as the ears and eyes of the common man in the affairs of the government. Social media in pre, during and post-election in Nigeria roles cannot be overemphasized as it stands as the only venue where individuals can wholly pour out their minds either in commendation or condemnation with regards to actions and inactions. It is, therefore, imperative that messages dispatched in social media platforms especially with regards to election matters be verifiable, true, credible and justifiable. These views were supported by Ajiteru, (2019) was of the view that with the advent of social media platforms, many voters access information, debate the sourced information, and give feedback, opinions, and expectations from the party and candidate before, during and after elections.

The line between chaos and peace is held by a strand of thread that needs no much pressure to snap. With regards to impacts of uncensored and unverified information passed across social media platforms during election period in Nigeria, it is evident that more harms are done rather than good, as tribes, individuals and even political parties create a hostile and toxic avenue for any comment, tweet, video or messages that goes contrary to their ideologies, some even releasing damaging information and unverified content as avenue to outsmart or ridicule opposing parties and candidates. This is in tandem with a study by Emmanuel (2017) that almost all political parties utilise social media platforms in campaign process and advancement of set plans and as such verifiable information should be an integral component of political packages delivered to the masses.

Freedom of speech and expression should not water down ethics of communication and social activities in the circulation of information and with regards to this study, election information. Although there are no known gatekeepers of social media, the people's consciousness can stand as a gatekeeper by ensuring that contents and messages with regards to election and other matters of the state be handled with the deepest care as the government is not just one person but the whole community and as such, an unbiased and ethical analysis of events is vital in dissection of politically related events. This is supported by a study by Sulaiman, Abalaka, & Ajiteru, (2017) in who came to reasonable conclusion that although social media influenced youths' choice of political candidate and party, as such parties and candidates should be weary and careful of contents released on media outlets especially social media.

Cocclusion

Social media influences cut across all aspects of human living and as such occupy a high rank in the unquenchable thirst for knowledge, update and information by man. With high rate of usage, different activities of government, international bodies, NGOs are relatively online connecting a large heterogeneous audience breaking the barriers of space and time, easing modus operandi. Nigeria youths of today, regard social media as a formidable medium for political discourse, and avenue of political connectivity. Social media had a high influence on youth participation in the Nigeria electoral process; pre, during and post-election. Social media platforms in politics opens pathways for positive or negative reactions of people to past and present activities of those involved in political activities of the country, therefore the tools of social media can either serve as tool for national building or catalyst of chaos and a concious efforts should be made by all involved to ensure that the tool of connectivity do not turn into a weapon of chaos and political rivalry. In line with the findings, it was recommended that: Positive efforts should be made by social media users before, during and after elections who are from different tribes supporting different political parties and candidates to ensure a peaceful coexist and an unbiased analysis of election processes in the country. The media role as an advocate of the people in the quest for peaceful pre and post-election period in Nigeria as such should transcend to personal social media users. Social media platforms messages and activities during election period in Nigeria should be properly tailored towards meeting the ethical standards and practices of journalism. Efforts should be made that political life outside social media should not differ from what is presented by the candidates and parties on social media.

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