Engaging the Electorates: Social Media and User-Generated (Dis)Content

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Abstract: *Technology, in the form of the internet and social media, has evolved to become powerful channels for enlightenment on issues of politics and electioneering. Referred to as the new political battlefield, the social media has attracted the attention of political activist, governments as well as the electorates. This paper seeks to highlight the critical role social networking sites play in political engagements and emphasises the emerging trend where social media has become a tool for expressing discontent towards governments and their policies. Today, User-Generated Content has offered citizens the opportunity to express, not only their support but also their discontent with governments, their policies and poor governance in general. Leveraging on an extensive review of extant literature and a survey of social media usage across diverse social networking platform, the paper presents evidence of a gradual trend towards using social media to voice out the ills of oppressive governments. Findings reveal that for political engagements on social media, there is a significant level of posting and sharing of content that expresses dissatisfaction and displeasure with governments. However, more importantly is that social media users do not 'unfriend' or 'block' their contacts based on opposing political affiliations and views. For practical purposes, this paper affirms the need for governments to engage more with the electorates. Such engagement will facilitate a better understanding of the expectations of the citizens.*

Keywords: *User-Generated Content, Electorates, Social Networking Sites, Citizen Engagement*

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of communication technologies has significantly impacted the way people interact with each other. Across all industry sectors, new relationships have been driven by new media technologies. From the invention of the press by Johannes Gutenberg, which heralded the Renaissance, Reformation and the Scientific Revolution to the invention of the radio, technology has always changed the course of history. The massive success on the radio as a communication tool heralded the invention of another technological masterpiece: television. Television came as a result of the need to transmit both integrated radio and visual signals at the same time. Globally, television has significantly influenced human activities since its discovery in the 20th Century. This is because, the invention of television radically transformed the society by redefining the culture, expectations, lifestyles, and most importantly, the behaviour of the people (Iwokwagh et al., 2012). Television plays a key role in entertainment, information, education and in virtually all sphere of human endeavour – eating habits, health concerns, agriculture, economy, politics, weather and so on.

With the 21st century came more complex technological developments in media and communication. Chief among these is the internet, seen as a convergence of print, radio and television, and represents a gradual transition from linear to digital technology. This transition is responsible for the intranet technology, new

media, and social media technologies. Today, we have virtual libraries that sit on the internet and a social media characterised by interactivity and participation by users.

The proliferation of Social Media at the turn of the century has significantly influenced the socio-political and economic activities inherent in diverse societies. The election of Barack Obama with its mantra of: "Change has come to America"; the Arab Spring demonstrations in the Middle East in 2011 led to the sacking of governments in Libya and other North African states. There is also the election that saw the emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as the president of Nigeria in 2011 and the one that saw his exit in 2015; political engagements in the 2011 general elections in Singapore and The Occupy Wall Street movement in New York in 2011. These are all clear examples of the power and influence of Social Media. These events relied strongly on Social Media activities which have resulted in the convergence of interpersonal communication and mass communication and thus creating what we call 'a global room'. According to Friedman (Friedman, 2007), personal computers coupled with the swiftness of interconnectivity and information transfer acted as a catalyst for a revolution in the digital space and almost removed the limitations of time and space (Friedman, 2007).

The exponential growth of the Social Media was a direct consequence of the digital revolution which rode on the back of the internet. A major turning point in this development is the discovery of Web 2.0 in 2005 by Tim O'Reilly. This technology made interaction on web platforms possible. Such interactions might be in the form of text, video, audio, and pictures. Consequently, web 2.0 brought about the convergence of audio, video, and text within the social media platforms. Leveraging on these media tools, individuals can communicate online real-time using either their computers, tablets, handheld terminals and smartphones. These technologies have made available to consumers, some new kind of intelligence which facilitates communications between these machines without much input from users. One can post, repost, share, like, and comment on a broad range of information in different forms (audio, video, and pictures) on a wide array of social networking sites (SNS).

1.   LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1   Philosophical Framework on Social Media Engagements

The primary criteria for defining humanity is communication. The nature and function of language as mans' chief instrument of communication occupies a pivotal position in the human sciences, particularly in philosophy. From the very beginning, human communication has been very problematic because, on the one hand, the term is a nominative description for different states of affairs while on the contrary, it seeks to explain the speech process which it views as an activity. The big question, therefore, is whether the apparent relationship between the nature and function of language is contradictory? Alternatively, whether the term communication is a term for both nature (description) and function (explanation) of language use in human behaviour exchange?

Hansen (2000) systematically engaged the technological viewpoint of scholars like Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari and those of Freud, Derrida, and Lacan who are authorities in post-modern philosophy and cultural studies. He argues that technology incorporates the connection between humanity and the world on which societal forms are themselves built. In his latest work, he posits that New Philosophy for New Media is a welcome effort to develop a phenomenological model of "body-machine" relationship through a kind of techno-aesthetics manifesto. His analysis draws on the perceived interaction between technical artefacts and the body with a focus on the interaction between these artefacts and the "body-brain". Hansen argues that in most of the works in new media, "it is the 'body' of the person that furnishes the locus for the experience of the work and not necessarily the work's representational content". Hence, the body-brain does not passively carry "cognitions", rather, these social media environments engage the body-brains' affective and proprioceptive capacities, rooted in its sensorimotor infrastructure.

In the context of this paper, one of the greatest gift of social media is user-generated content (which has facilitated the resurrection of a long lost ability to express oneself freely in the public sphere) or better still, referred to as unfettered freedom to express oneself. In other words, social media (technology) mediates the ability of free expression. Pertinent philosophical questions arise when we consider the mediating role of technology in human engagements. The ontology of the person as a social being is critical to understanding the need for communal engagement amongst individuals. These issues are brought to the fore during the process of political participation of the masses during electioneering. Every form of human engagement (communication) follows the path as posited by different theorist in their effort to develop a model of communication. From science, communication is initiated by a sender, sent through a medium to a receiver who transcribes such message and reacts to it through some form of feedback. Scientifically, this is fairly simplistic. Viewed from a philosophical perspective, one needs to ask: why the need for engagement? Does the fact that human beings are social by makeup responsible for this expression of self?

It seems people, ideas, values, and cultural artefacts from all over the world are fated to bump into each other, either physically or virtually. In consideration of the plurality of our social sphere, how do we manage divergent views when it gets increasingly harder to keep aloof? We all are compelled to engage with each other even though we are exposed to different value system arising from various historical circumstances based on philosophical traditions. In such scenario, how do we pick and choose? How do we engage people of diverse cultures and philosophical backgrounds? Holding on to ideas out of loyalty to our forebears today seems weak since they might also react differently if presented with the same scenario. Thus, as individuals, we are always presented with a choice.

2.2   Theoretical Underpinnings

Various theories have been propounded around the point of convergence between society, technology and the media. Functionalism focuses on the role of technology and the media on the stability of the society. This ranges from facilitating recreation to increased productivity. The conflict theorist focuses more on how technology reinforces inequalities (for example, status conferral) among individuals, communities, races, and even across nations. This position also focuses on how the media normally gives voice to the bourgeoisie, and how social media has facilitated the expressiveness of those societal segment referred to as disenfranchised (muted groups). Symbolic interactionists highlight the position that the access to, and use of technology are signs of affluence and a successful professional life.

However, most important is technology determinism which posits that media technology determines how people in a social environment think, feel, act and how societies adjust to evolution in media technology. The advent of new media, in association with innovations such as Web 2.0 and the social networking sites, have brought about a spurt in what is termed "cool media". Technological Determinism is probably the most significant, but controversial theory of broadcasting. Marshall McLuhan, in his theory, posits that media are extensions of human sensory faculties, and thus was not as concerned with its content as with the form. For him, the transition from logocentrism to a mediated, aural culture was of primary importance.

2.3   The Role of Technology in the Media

The dawn of a new century came with massive developments in the way we communicate, driven by the evolution of the digital network. These include both the rapid development of previously existing media technologies, and the emergence of new telecommunication technologies: satellites, fibre optics, cable television, compact discs, video cassettes, digital image making applications and other computer and digital technology (Khattak et al., 2012). This exponential growth is now being considered a strong unifying factor across diverse societies. The activities on the blogosphere, the effects of music distribution across individuals and online

communities, and the exponential growth of YouTube in 2006 have all challenged the foundations of mass media industries (Lister et al., 2009). We no longer refer to the world as a global village but a global room! These technological innovations drastically changed the media world. The information revolution has facilitated the sending of messages from one part of the world to the other in real-time. Even the print media has finally bowed to pressure and have adopted digital technology in news gathering, analysis and dissemination via online platforms. The industry is now extremely sophisticated and surely more complicated.

Technology can be seen as the application of science to solve challenges of everyday life (Littele et al., 2014). The rapid rate of advancements in technology is an indicator that changes in the technological domain are continuous. This results in an unequal access because while the early adopters embrace such technology, there is a delay among the laggards. The gap caused by this unequal access to technology is referred to as the digital divide. A few decades ago, it was a privilege to have access to the internet and even more to be computer literate. Today, a greater number of individuals has a fair idea of what the internet is and how to navigate around the personal computer. This basic knowledge is enough for most people to voice their feelings and opinions via the new media. One does not need to be physically present at a political rally to comment on the event. All that is required is to rely on those who covered the event and a bit of assistance from Google and social networking sites. Publishing is no more the rigorous process it used to be, the blogs have taken over and has made it possible to publish media contents in minutes.

Technology and the media are expanding the confines of our social sphere and at the same time changing the way people view and communicate with one another. Facebook has evolved from a medium used to keep in touch with friends to a medium which can be used to "like" TV shows, popular brands, and celebrities. In like manner, even television is now a two-way medium having incorporated an interactive component as seen in smart TVs. We are constantly encouraged to call in, text, tweet, comment or express our opinion on topical issues. Little and McGivern (Littele et al., 2014) affirms that there has been a close relationship between media and technology from the earliest days of human communication. Whereas mass media has encouraged and facilitated the sharing of social experiences, new media has made available a huge opportunity for those voices that seek to be heard.

2.4   New Media, Social Networking Sites and User-Generated Content

The term new media incorporates virtually all forms of interactive information exchange leading to a seamless, real-time relationship between sender and receiver. Examples include all social networking sites (SNS), podcasts, blogs, Wikipedia and Wikimedia, and virtual communities. The list is always on the increase, with new applications developed almost on a daily basis. New media tends to create a level playing field regarding who is constructing the messages (i.e., creating, publishing, distributing, and accessing information) (Lievrouw et al., 2006). It also offers an alternative platform for those groups who find it difficult to gain access to the traditional media and various traditional political platforms (van de Donk et al., 2004). A critical downside is that the validity and reliability of the information disseminated are not guaranteed. The immediacy of new media activities plus the lack of strong regulations, calls for caution and the need to confirm the reliability of the sources of such information (Little et al., 2004).

New media has re-defined the way information is shared in ways deemed unimaginable even a decade ago. Today, for instance, major players in the new media market like Google and Facebook have ventured into the aerial drones' market, a strategy aimed at creating an exponential capacity in data collection and broadcasting.

Since the discovery of the internet, the number of people connected to the web has grown from a few million subscribers to over 3 billion users. Within this period, the social media has grown to be an integral part of civic life worldwide. Usage today involves several actors – citizens, political activists, nonprofit and nongovernmental

organisations, operators in the communications sector, software providers and even governments (Shirky, 2011). This has resulted in a denser, more intricate and more participatory communication landscape where those connected has access to more information with greater chance to engage a wider audience.

The development of the Web 2.0 and the emergence of social networking sites has resulted in massive growth of user participation in the social media – a phenomenon termed User Generated Content (UGC). This practice is evident in contextual analysis, product reviews, personal advertising, blogs, and other contributions to the social web initiated by consumers (Fader et al., 2012). Unlike Web 1.0 that is unidirectional, allowing messages to be posted by the owner or administrator of the platform, Web 2.0 is dominated by the consumer or the audience. All that is required to participate is a browser and an internet connection. Web 2.0 makes it possible for media consumers to speak out boldly, whether they are giving testimonials for a good brand or critiquing a less than adequate one.

This does not take away the fact that there has always been some audience participation in news production. Phone-in programs on radio, letters to the editor on print media and messages from viewers on television all lay credence to a history of user participation. Consequently, most media house and practitioners see User Generated Content today as an extension of this tradition. Currently, however, there is a radical shift in the way users participate in the news process. This difference is better understood when we consider the key characteristics of UGC. Unlike the print and broadcast media, players in the social media do not have to send in their comments, pictures or views to the mainstream media for distribution to the audience. They simply upload messages, video, text or graphics to any of the social media platforms which have the capacity to reach millions of users at the click of a button. They can provide unedited material and share same with the online community in the form of blogs. The reach depends on the quality of the material, the expertise of the "poster" and in some cases, the impact.

Another key feature of user-generated content is that there is no limit to what can be posted. To tap into the opportunities presented by UGC, some media houses have set up full websites where there is unlimited access to their audience. Vanguard newspaper is one good example of a media house that pioneered the use of Web 2.0 enabled website in Nigeria where their audience can post comments, views, and opinions. These gave the media house an excellent insight into the minds and positions of their readers. Though User-generated content has been in use for some years now, its popularity has grown exponentially in the past eight years. At the onset, UGC was seen on website forums and discussion boards but has transformed to be available on the web (Bell, 2007). Today, UGC can be text-based, graphic-based, audio, video or a mix of all (Valcke et al., 2010).

Some factors have contributed to this phenomenal growth. These include the increase in bandwidth, the digitisation of photography, emergence of new ways to create and post content, increase in teledensity, the advent of an array of social networking sites and the advertising and consequent capitalism of the web. These factors are responsible for the myriads of social networking sites in existence today - The Facebooks, Myspace, Twitter, Flikr, YouTube, Wikis, LinkedIn, Instagram, Weibo, Hi5 and so many others. User-generated content (UGC) is one of the fastest growing forms of new media with contents arising from selfies, video recordings, postings on the blog, or customer-supplied reviews and ratings. Participants are increasingly involved in the content-production process to a far greater extent than one could have imagined a decade ago. UGC is useful in providing information, engaging in analysis of topical issues, platforms for debate, and in mass mobilisation for qualifying social causes (Iwokwagh et al., 2012). User Generated Content enhances peoples' ability to challenge repressive government policies, corruption and illegal acquisition of wealth, police brutality, racial discrimination, injustice, social inequalities and electoral fraud.

Studies have also shown that social media users have used social networking sites to post their thoughts about social, civic and political issues. Citizens have also leveraged on SNS in reacting to posts, compel friends to act

on issues and vote, follow candidates, 'like' and link to others' content, and belong to different groups on social networking sites (Smith et al., 2012). Citizen engagements using social media has become a key feature of civic and political life for a greater proportion of the populace. This phenomenon has given rise to what scholars refer to as a personalised collective action (Bennett, 2012). Political discussions on social networks always instigate a measure of dispute among friends. Thus, these social networking sites expose surprising revelations about people's attitudes and views. In several cases, friends who have opposing views on politics are shunned while those that share the same political ideologies and belief came closer together (Rainie et al., 2012). It is surprising to discover that very close friends and even family members have diverse political leanings and ideology.

2.   Methodology

This paper leveraged on both an extensive review of extant literature and an online survey carried out in Lagos state among active social media users. The research population refers to individuals who possess one or more social media account and are active users. A non-probability sampling procedure was adopted, and the questionnaire was designed to address the key objectives of the research. Key questionnaire questions applied the 5-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. For the purpose of analysis, strongly disagree to undecided are viewed as negatives while Agree to Strongly Agree are recorded as positive answers.

3.   Findings and Discussion

Results indicate that all respondents have multiple social media accounts and that 71.4% of the total are interested in political discussions on social media. Out of this number, 61% are attracted to discourse on politics. Thus, they will read posts on politics, share such posts and even create and publish their views on politics using social media. Findings also indicate that 43% of the population who engage in political discussions on social media share messages that support the efforts and activities of the government while 54% are more inclined to share messages that express discontent with the governments and their activities. Furthermore, 32% of the same population create and publish messages that support government operations, and efforts while 41% are more interested in creating and publishing messages that express discontent with government activities, policies and governance. These results are indicative of a gradual shift towards using social media to express discontent with governments. More instructive, however, is that irrespective of the glaring differences in political affiliations, 94% respondents said they would not "unfriend" or "block" a contact whose political affiliations are at variance with theirs. This indicates a high level of tolerance on individual choices and political affiliations.

Social networking sites have become places where political conversation, debate, and proselytising occur, especially during campaign seasons (Rainie et al., 2012). In Nigeria, these new political battlefields have attracted the attention of political activist and have been an area of interest since the "breath of fresh air" campaign of former President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan in 2011. This phenomenon has however led to some concerns about the overall impact of social media on the political culture of Nigerians. The concern is that politically active users of social networking sites might customise their networks by connecting with only those who share or reinforce their political beliefs. In other climes, users of social networking sites "block", "unfriend", or "hide" a contact because of their political leanings and posting activities (Rainie et al., 2012).

During the last two general elections in Nigeria, the participatory potential of the social networking sites was heavily tested and appreciated. This was a confirmation that electioneering facilitates the test of new social media applications and technologies (Kaun et al., 2011). Social media activities leading up to the 2011 and 2015 general elections in Nigeria indicates that Facebook provided an elaborate platform for the aspirants who had all set up fan pages to facilitate information flow between the politicians and the electorate. For people who were in support of Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the Peoples' Democratic Party, social networking sites provided an excellent opportunity for the extension of this support. Facebook also facilitated the propagation of the

candidacy of other contestants from other political parties (Iwokwagh et al., 2012). Through social networks, the electorates had a medium through which they share their views and opinions. This significantly increased effective participation in the electoral process. The social media represent a system that does not just speak for the people but is a strong avenue that allows participants to speak for themselves. The social media, therefore, provided the required platform for Nigerians to express their opinions, thoughts, frustrations and demands from key political contenders.

During the campaign for the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, the incumbent president, Dr Goodluck Jonathan, went as far as appointing a special adviser on social media to take charge of information dissemination on social networking sites and image management for the government. There was also the emergence of "attack dogs" - those employed by politicians to "attack" any post or comments on social networking sites viewed as antagonistic to the political aspirations of their candidates and the positions of their political benefactors. Their duty entails combing the social media looking for posts and comments from opposition parties and critiquing such with harsh, derogatory and insulting words. Ad-hominem became the order of the day and parties are seen hauling insults on personalities instead of addressing issues as presented by their political contenders and the citizens. That this strategy was heavily deployed indicates that it can swing votes either to or against each political group.

In brazen defiance of authoritarian governments in North Africa, social media has provided avenues for the establishment and expansion of networks that the governments found difficult to control. These networks include labour unions, opposition parties, students' union, pressure groups and non-governmental organisations. Their activities involve supporting the dissemination of news about government repression. In such cases, social media became a connector between groups previously unknown to each other who converge to spread shared grievances beyond the small community of activist leaders in their bid to globalise their reach and appeal for democratic change (Lim, 2012). This was the case in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen where a greater percentage of the masses rose against a repressive government. This uprising led to the sack of sitting governments in these countries. Ample evidence has shown that social media played a critical role in organising and sustaining protests during the Arab uprising by acting as a megaphone for broadcasting information (Aday et al., 2012). During this period, social media users depended solely on the internet for information on the activities and interactions with the organisers of such event via social networking sites. Increasingly, the social media is becoming a bee-hive of information, leaning more towards discontent and less on commendation. This is not surprising given the poor state of infrastructure and lack of governance in most underdeveloped nations. This has further resulted in a greater percentage of social media users leveraging on the boom in digital communication to vent their discontent and make demands for better services.

Nigerian electorates who previously were denied access to the traditional mass media found expression on social networking sites especially, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and many others (Iwokwagh et al., 2012). These set of people posted comments that could never have found their way into any of the mass media of print, radio or television. Calling Muhammadu Buhari an Islamist with the sole aim of Islamizing Nigeria and presenting Goodluck Jonathan as a weak and incompetent leader who lacks the courage to control the affairs of the Nation are examples of news that will struggle to find their way into the traditional mass media. In all these, the electorates showed a high level of emotion in the way they either defended their candidates or viewed opposition candidates. In some cases, conflicting and selfish information which bred misinformation to the less discerning is published on social media during the electioneering period in Nigeria (Iwokwagh et al., 2012). Thus, the social media was characterised by speculations, unfounded allegations, and propaganda. Debates turned ugly and precipitated to abuse and insults and often led to threats. This left the masses no option than to resort to clicking the unlike button, unfriending their contacts and hiding posts from those seen as antagonistic to their views.

4.   Conclusion

A critical review of extant literature has shown a strong relationship between political science and the mass media. Berelson, Lazarsfeld, Merton, MacPhee, Klapper were among the first to carry out studies on the sociology of communications (de Moragas, 1990). A key area of focus in all these studies was politics with emphasis on electoral phenomena. Lasswell in his earliest functionalist studies on communication also focused on the communicative organisation of political institutions. Authors like Hovland and Tchathotine who are key profounders of the theory of persuasion leveraged their position on the communicative behaviour of politics.

The relationship between communication and politics is centred on the "effects" stage of the communication model as propounded by Lasswell (Lasswell, 1948). This is because the mass media is perceived as having the capacity to generate an immediate effect on the political behaviour of the masses. However, while the mass media has always been seen in this light, profound changes in communication technology has made it imperative to look at the effects of technological advancements in the mass media. In recent years, transformations in communication technology have limited the independence of the communications sector. Research has consistently found that "people who consume more news media have a greater probability of being civically and politically engaged across a variety of measures" (Shelley, 2015).

Technology, in the form of the internet and social media, has evolved to become powerful channels for enlightenment on issues of politics and electioneering. Through social networking sites, the electorates encourage associates, friends and family to vote while supporting favourite candidates whom they believe will address their concerns and represent their interests. This is made possible because of the possibility of getting immediate, data-driven feedback to comments and posts on social media. Before the advent of digital communications, political activities were exemplified by pounding the streets and distributing printed fliers and engaging in door-to-door networking. This practice has been taken over by "clicktivism" which is a form of pseudo-activism made possible through quick, easy and seamless online actions. In consideration of global mass movements, there is a need to view online activism along a spectrum: from online groups formed spontaneously around specific societal challenges, to a more strategic long-term social movement where digital tools are employed to further the goals of the conveners and finally to established civil society groups with a more permanent objective. Posting and reading political messages and comments on other people's Facebook walls and one's online activities can inspire future political activities in other venues (Vissers et al., 2014). This can be at political rallies, social gatherings and even on protest marches.

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