

# When New Media Expands the Political Space: A Narrative of the Use of Social Media for Political Participation in the 2015 Presidential Election in Nigeria

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the use of social media as emerging tool for political participation in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. In carrying out the study, survey research method was used. The study population was the registered voters in the South East. A total of three hundred and ninety-two (392) respondents were used for the study. The multi-stage sampling technique was used in selecting the respondents. The result revealed that although the use of social media in the mobilization of the electorate to participate in the 2015 presidential election was still at the average level, the social media have contributed significantly to the appreciable level of turnout and effective participation of the electorate as witnessed in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. Also, ignorance and poverty were discovered to be the major factors hindering the effective use of social media in voter mobilization in the 2015 presidential election. Based on these research findings, the researchers recommended that serious, intensive and aggressive enlightenment should be embarked on by politicians to create the much desired awareness in the electorate to become more informed about the importance or potentials of social media in political participation. Politicians should be more actively involved in using the social media to mobilize the electorate during campaigns since many of the electorates are now showing interest in the social media. More Internet facilities especially in the rural areas should be provided for effective online participation and usage by the electorate.

**Keywords:** *.Social Media .Political participation .Electorates .Elections*

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, the advancement in technology and communication has gone hand-in-hand, and the latest technological developments such as the Internet have resulted in the advancement of the science of communication to a new level. The process of human communication has evolved over the years, with many path-breaking inventions and discoveries heralding revolutions. The invention of pictographs or the first written communication in the ancient world brought about written communication. Before now, people have been communicating with their relatives and friends using various primitive media such as clay tablets, papyrus parchment, flag, smoke or drums. The first medium which the early people used for their journalism practice was stone. In the year 1450, Johannes Gutenberg, who happened to be a goldsmith and a businessman developed a truly new communication technology that changed the world of printing. Gutenberg invented a printing press that could produce more than hundred copies of books in a day. This early technological innovation by Gutenberg no doubt suddenly made the dissemination of information quicker and cheaper.

Beginning from the time of Gutenberg till today, more and more media are being included in the communication system. Each of these media being included in the communication system no doubt is as a result of one form of technological innovation or the other. This was why the Canadian sociologist in his book titled "The Gutenberg Galaxy" predicted that the world would be a global village. Today, this prediction has become a thing of reality.

The latest revolution is the widespread application of electronic technology such as electronic waves and signals for communication, manifesting in the electronic creation and transfer of messages to the World Wide Web (Wikipedia, 2015).

Social media which are a form of electronic communication have become the highest activity on the Internet in recent times. They refer to social networking websites developed to specifically help people share their views and stay in touch with their friends, relatives, well wishers and other interest groups in the society. Social media represents a paradigm shift in how people discover, read and share news or information content which brought about the democratization of information, transforming people from being content readers to publishers. According to Bruce and Douglas (2008), social media are Internet sites where people interact freely, sharing and discussing information about each other and their lives, using a multi-media mix of personal words, pictures, videos and audio. This simply means that the social media create an endless world for people who have something important to share to continually do so without the bureaucratic impediments usually witnessed in the past in information gathering and dissemination.

A brief history of the social media reveals that in the early 1990s, chat rooms and bulletin boards were forms of social media; in that they helped people connect with others and share interests. A little later, dating sites hooked together those looking for partners, and classmate. Com enabled people to connect with those they had known in higher schools and colleges. In the early 2000s, a site called Friendster was set up where people invited their friends to join and in turn, those friends invited other friends. The site was popular for a while but it suffered from technical difficulties and fake profiles and began losing members. Some of those members went to MySpace, which had actually started in 1999 but later came to limelight in the year 2003. At this early stage, its root was a little muddy because it received financial and logistic assistance from another company named Euniverse, and most of the early users were Euniverse employees, but Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe were given credit for most of the innovations and successes recorded by the site which enabled it build up to 115 million users worldwide as of that time. Members post bios, photos, blogs, videos and other materials that stroke their fancy, and some TV programmes to air on MySpace. In 2005, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (Parent of Fox Broadcasting) bought MySpace for 580 million dollars.

A competitor of MySpace, Facebook, surfaced in 2004 courtesy of Mark Zuckerberg while he was a student at Harvard University; it developed rapidly about 2007. At first, Facebook was solely designed for college and high school students, but Zuckerberg opened it to everyone and like MySpace, it encourages all types of member postings, (Gross, 2010). Apart from the above mentioned social media tools, there are equally others like Twitter, YouTube, BlackBerry messenger, Flickr, Word press, Blogger, Badoo, Live journal, Type pad, Second life, Lulu etc. All these social media appear in different forms including blogs and microblogs, forums, message boards, social networks, wikis, social bookmarking, tagging and many more.

The social media have proved to be effective channels of political enlightenment and mobilization which have triggered off effective and active participation of the electorate in the political system. For instance, in 2004, during the presidential election in Iraq, politicians used the social media to mobilize against election results and expose post election demonstrations against the president, Ahmadinejad.

Social media platforms like the Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have created new means for mobilizing and sensitizing electorate to actively participate in electioneering especially in a democratic system of government.

Personal communication through the social media creates a favourable platform for the politicians and their prospective voters to come closer. It allows the politicians to communicate faster and reach electorate in a more targeted and well informed way. This in turn enables them to take an informed decision.

To add credence to the above point, *the Nation* (2010) describes social media as instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers. It went further to explain that while the regular media operate as a one-way street where a person could read a newspaper or listen to a report on television with very limited ability to give his thought on the content, the social media operate as a two-way street that gives a person or receiver the ability to communicate.

From the foregoing, there is no doubt that this technological innovation has revolutionalized the methods of contemporary political communication by way of influencing how politicians interact with their parties and the electorate as well.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The impact of social media in the contemporary communication world, especially in the area of political participation cannot be over-looked. Since its arrival as a communication tool, the social media have certainly changed the way people now participate in politics. How politicians package and disseminate their campaign messages have equally taken a new dimension as a result of the use of social media. This has not only increased the level of political awareness on the part of the electorate but it has also improved the level of political participation.

In spite of all these gains of the social media in mobilizing the electorate for effective participation in elections, the Nigerian electorates are yet to fully utilize these overwhelming opportunities provided by the new media in the area of political mobilization vis-a-vis participation.

Therefore, this study is meant to assess how the social media was used in mobilizing the electorate to effectively and actively participate in the 2015 presidential elections.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the level of social media use in mobilizing electorate to participate in 2015 presidential election?
2. What type of social media tools did electorate in Nigeria prefer during the 2015 presidential election?
3. Did social media enhance the level of voter participation in the 2015 presidential election?
4. What factors can be attributed to the ineffective utilization of the social media in mobilizing the electorate to participate in the 2015 presidential election?

### **Literature Review**

Social media is not something really new. While it has only recently become part of mainstream culture in the business world, people have been using digital media for networking and socializing. The most recognizable use of social media was through innovative application, an online dialogue framework, created by Ward Christensen, a former IBM employee and Randy Suess.

Today, these new media are gradually gaining ground in the political environment. Their effectiveness to gather and communicate a targeted political message, raising the stakes in strategy and aggressive social media participation helps in mobilizing the electorate. The use of social networking sites by political parties, spans across increased media exposure, funding, participation and has increased mobilization and enthusiasm in

many recent political campaigns. The social networking sites have become fast and cost effective communication tools that enhance quick and easy access to political information among potential users. Campaign managers as well as party candidates use these sites as an effective means of reaching the electorate.

Social media create a new political dialogue. It takes the power of political messaging away from the mass media model and places it firmly into peer-to-peer, public discourse (Rutledge, 2013). What this means is that the social media empower and improve the electorate politically in the form of circulating political messages faster which in turn facilitates two-way flow of political communication among the electorate.

Still on the participatory nature of the social media which gives the electorate the sense of active involvement in the political process, Clark and Aufderhelde (2009) noted that the opportunity to enjoy user-to-user interaction distinguishes social media from the traditional media which is characterized by top-down news dissemination arrangement. That is to say that the social media created an environment of real-time communication flow, thereby allowing candidates to directly mobilize voters and key influencers in the society to be fully involved in the electioneering process.

In the United States of America, 46% of American voters have used the Internet, text messaging or e-mail for political mobilization, discussion and to access political news and information and 35% of people in the US watched political videos on YouTube (Pew Research Centre, 2013). Thus, social media are playing significant role in the electioneering processes, and this no doubt has positively changed the way people now go about their political campaigns. Researchers at the MacArthur Research Network on Youth and Participatory Politics reported that young people who are politically active online are twice as likely to vote than those who are not. In Africa, the recent statistics by a global digital outfit "We Are Social," shows that Africa has about 293 million active Internet users and about 103 million active social media subscribers. This goes to show that Africa is still lagging behind when compared to its population of about 1.1 billion.

It is on record that President Barack Obama was the first president to effectively use the social media in mobilizing the electorate to actively participate in the 2008 presidential campaign. The 2008 presidential election was adjudged as the first in which all candidates in the presidential and congressional race tried to connect directly with their supporters and electorate through online social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Obama used one of the Facebook cofounder Chris Hughes a 24-year old young man to launch his political campaign on Facebook. During this period, Obama wrote the social media playbook for politicians in his campaign, mobilizing millions of supporters to defeat his rivalries Hilary Clinton and John McCain in the general election. In 2012 presidential election, Barack Obama successfully used Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, MySpace to communicate and mobilize the electorate. In addition to this, Obama had \$2 million dollar custom campaigning and social networking site built, MyBarackObama.com (Walmsky, 2008; Crow, 2008; Talbot, 2008 cited in UK Essay, 2015).

Social media have the capacity to lure the electorate to the poll. During the 2012 general election in the United States, about 92 percent of individuals between the ages of 18 and 29 were actively involved in social networking sites. Also, in the same survey, 30 percent of the registered voters were encouraged to vote for Obama or Romney by friends and family through postings on the social media sites, Facebook and Twitter.

### **Social Media and Political Participation: The Nigerian Experience**

In Nigeria, the politicians have equally adopted the social media campaign strategies like their counterparts in the United States of America. In the 2015 presidential election, politicians made use of social networking tools to communicate and mobilize the electorate to effectively participate in the election. As expected, social media played significant role in defining and redefining the concept of politicking and campaigning in today's digitalized society. For instance, Hashtags like #meetGeJ, #Febuhari, #March-

forBuhari, #Lagosforyou, #MarchforJonathan, #GM15, etc were all used during the campaigns by party candidates and their supporters to create and increase the level of political awareness and participation among the electorate.

Politicians in Nigeria have come to realize the importance of Internet and the social networking systems during and after the 2015 presidential election. The election heralded the use of information and communication technologies in the history of electioneering process. The former President Goodluck Jonathan and other contestants made extensive use of the social media in the campaign process. Before the arrival of the social media, political campaigns and other participatory activities thrived in the mainstream media. Quoting Objide (2012), Onwukwe (2011) observed that prior to this period, political rallies, personal contacts and speeches were popularly used for mobilizing electorate's support on political issues, and that this was propelled by the force of the mass media. At that time, political participation was more risky, expensive and required a great deal of investment from individuals willing to engage in political activities. The process was quite tasking as far as time, money, knowledge and information were concerned but today, the story has changed.

Through the social media, issues among the different political parties were exposed to the electorate. Allegations and counter-allegations have been made among the parties. The supporters of the various political parties have probed different ideologies and campaign promises of their opponents through social networking tools, thereby making the conversations in the 2015 presidential election more engaging, educating, interesting and participatory too. The social media as vehicles that transmit messages to large and heterogeneous audience are so pervasive in modern politics. Their roles in facilitating the process of political interaction, transactions and information acquisition among different publics of any particular organization, have made the social media a versatile communication tool for political campaigns. With this new media in the field of politics, politicians can now easily integrate and access mass data about their supporters and the electorate as well, at any point in time.

In line with the above, *The Nation* (2010) sees the social media as instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers. It went further to explain that while the regular media operate as a one-way street where a person could read a newspaper or listen to a report on television with very limited ability to give his thought on the content, the social media operate as a two-way street that gives a person or receiver the ability to communicate. This made the electorate to take informed decision during the election. Social media have created an enabling environment for party candidates and the electorate to directly communicate to one another, keeping them abreast with their manifestos and reducing their dependency level on traditional intermediaries.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored on the Democratic- Participant Media theory and Technological Determinism Theory.

#### **Democratic- Participant Media Theory**

The democratic- participant media theory was propounded by McQuail in 1987. The theory emanates from the realization of the development in new media and intense criticism of the dominance of the main mass media by private or public monopolies. Okunna (1999), citing McQuail (1987), gives the fundamental principle of the democratic-participant media theory as the:

needs, interests and aspirations of the active "receiver" in a political society (and) and has to do with the right to relevant information, the right to answer back, the right to use the means of communication for interaction...

The main thrust of democratic-participant media theory lies in its insistence that the existing bureaucracy as well as commercial and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down, so as to guarantee easier media access for all potential users and consumers (Folarin, 2002, p. 33).

### **Technological Determinism Theory**

This theory was propounded by Marshall McLuhan in 1962. This theory helps to explain how innovation in modern technology helps to engineer some forms of change in society or in the ordering of things.

Baran and Davis (2006, p.302) noted that "McLuhan's theory is actually a collection of lot's of intriguing ideas bound together by some common assumptions. The most central of these assumptions is that changes in communication technology inevitably produce changes in both cultural and social order... McLuhan seemed ready to accept whatever changes were dictated by and inherent in communications technology... Technology inevitably causes specific changes in how people think, in how society is structured, and in the forms of culture that are created".

McQuail (2010, p.103) listed the basic assumptions of this theory as follows:

1. Communication technology is fundamental to society.
2. Each technology has a bias to particular communication forms, contents and uses.
3. The sequence of invention and application of communication technology influences the direction and pace of social change.
4. Communication revolutions lead to social revolutions.

The main tenet of this theory is that the invention of new technology can change how society reacts to events or what they use to do in an old way.

These theories are relevant to this study because they provide alternative approach to media audience, particularly the active users of the media who depend on the media for up-to -date intelligence report on the society. With Facebook, Youtube, Twitter and LinkedIn etc, audiences are exposed to an avalanche of interactive media networks from which they not only expose themselves to but participate actively in uploading, downloading, fact checking, and updating information with the aid of the Internet and digital technology gadgets.

### **Methodology**

Bearing in mind the fact that there are different types of research methods open to any researcher, one has to agree that the choice of any type of research method is dependent on the nature and scope of the research work. Thus; for the purpose of this study, survey research method was used. The survey is research method which focuses on a representative sample derived from the entire population (Nwodu, 2006). The survey method was adopted because of its ability to ensure a representative outlook and provide a simple approach to the study of opinions, attitude and values of individuals.

### **Population of the Study**

The population of study consists of the registered voters in the South East Geopolitical zone of Nigeria which is made up of Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Imo and Ebonyi states. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (2015), the population of registered voters in the South East is 7,665,859.

### **Sample Size**

From the population of 7,665,859, a sample size of 400 was drawn at 0.05 error margin using the Taro Yamanie's formula.

### Sampling Technique

In carrying out this study, the researchers adopted the multi-stage sampling technique. This technique requires the use of several sampling techniques or /and stages in a particular method for ensuring proper representation, especially when the population is large and complex (Chukwuma, 2015).

### Data Presentation and Analysis

A total of four hundred (400) copies of the questionnaire were distributed to four hundred respondents. Out of this total number distributed, three hundred and ninety-two (392) or ninety-eight percent (98%) of the copies of questionnaire were returned. This number is however, valid for the study.

**Research Question One:** What is the level of social media usage in mobilizing electorate to participate in the 2015 presidential election?

**Table 1:** Showing the level of social media usage in mobilizing electorate to participate in the 2015 presidential election.

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Very high	10	4.2%
High	17	7.1%
Average	203	85.3%
Low	109	27.8%
Very low	53	13.5%
Can't say	0	0%
Total	392	100%

Table one above shows that 10 or 4.2% of the respondents believed that the use of social media in mobilization electorate to participate in the 2015 presidential election was very high, 17 or 7.1% said that the use was high, 203 or 85.3% of the respondents believed that the level was average, 109 or 27.8% said the level was low, 53 or 13.5% of the respondents said that the level was very low while 0 representing 0% was undecided.

From the data presented in table 1 above, it can be said that social media application for the mobilization of the electorate in Nigeria to participate in election is still at the average level. This according to the respondents was as a result of the level of their awareness in the use of the social media tools.

**Research Question Two:** What type of social media tools did electorate in Nigeria prefer during the 2015 presidential election?

**Table 2:** Showing the type of social media tool electorate preferred in the 2015 presidential election.

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Facebook	251	64%
Twitter	111	28.3%
WhatsApp	22	5.6%
2go	5	1.3%
Others	3	0.8%
Total	392	100%

Table 2 indicates that 251 or 64% of the respondents said that they made use of Facebook, 111 or 28.3% identified Twitter as their most preferred, 22 or 5.6% of the respondents chose WhatsApp, 5 or 1.3% said they preferred 2go while 3 or 0.8% said others.

From the information presented in table 2, it is clear that most of the electorates preferred Facebook and Twitter to any other social media tools in the 2015 presidential election.

**Research Question 3:** Did social media enhance the level of voter participation in the 2015 presidential election?

**Table 3:** Showing respondents views on whether social media enhanced the level of voter participation in the 2015 presidential election.

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	392	100%
No	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 3 shows that all the respondents sampled agreed that social media have enhanced the level of voter participation in the 2015 presidential election.

**Research Question 4:** What factors can be attributed to the ineffective utilization of the social media in mobilizing the electorate to participate in the 2015 presidential election?

**Table 4:** Distribution of respondents' view on the factors responsible for ineffective utilization of social media for political participation in the 2015 presidential election.

Response	No of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Illiteracy	13	5.5%
Ignorance	225	57.4%
Poverty	149	38.0%
Others	5	1.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>392</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 4 above shows that 13 or 5.5% of the respondents believed that illiteracy is the contributory factor to the ineffective utilization of the social media for political participation in the 2015 presidential election, 225 or 57.4% of the respondents agreed that ignorance is the main factor hindering the use of social media for political participation in the 2015 presidential election, 149 or 38.0% of the respondents said it is poverty while 5 or 1.3% identified others.

From the data presented in table 4 above, it can be deduced that ignorance and poverty are the major factors hindering the effective utilization of the social media for political participation in the 2015 presidential election.

### **Conclusion**

The analysis and findings of the study revealed that although the use of social media in mobilization of the electorate to participate in the 2015 presidential election is still at the average, social media have contributed significantly to the appreciable level of turnout and effective participation of the electorate witnessed in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The new media have also increased the level of involvement of the electorate in electioneering processes. Ignorance and poverty were equally identified as the major factors hindering the effective use of social media in voter mobilization and participation in the 2015 presidential election. However, notwithstanding all these factors that hinder the use of social media in political participation during the presidential election, the application was relatively commendable.

### Recommendations

1. Serious, intensive and aggressive enlightenment should be embarked on by politicians to create the much desired awareness in the electorate to become more informed about importance or potentials of social media in political participation.
2. Politicians should be more actively involved in using the social media to mobilize the electorate during campaigns since many of the Nigerian electorate are now showing interest in the social media.
3. More Internet facilities should be provided for effective online participation and usage by the electorate.

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