

# **NEW MEDIA FOR ELECTION COVERAGE: APPRAISING JOURNALISTS' ROLE IN NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

This paper, qualitatively appraised the utilisation of new media for election coverage by journalists in Nigeria. This became necessary following the assumptions that new media are double-edged sword capable of provoking creativity when effectively utilised in coverage of elections as well as capable of creating chaos when not properly harnessed. Anchored on the development media and technological determinism theories; the paper adopted explanation building technique which draws heavily on inferences from primary and secondary data like literature and empirical studies. Thus, the impact of new media for election coverage by journalists and different types of new media for election coverage were highlighted. However, it was argued that factors such as credibility issues, new media acting as a form of distraction and promotion of fake news should be critically considered when using new media for election coverage. Therefore, it was concluded that the use of new media platforms for election coverage by journalists will continue to gain more grounds because of the possibility of immediate feedback, interactivity, speed, affordability, availability, etc. associated with new media in information acquisition and dissemination no matter the negative issues surrounding them. Hence, it was recommended that professional and regulatory bodies like NUJ, NPI, etc. must urgently work out modalities to regulate the activities of citizen journalists who are most times behind the wrong use of new media for election coverage among other things.

**Keywords: Citizen Journalist, Election, ICTs/New Media, Journalist, Nigeria**

## **INTRODUCTION**

New media are now the fastest and smartest means of communicating election results globally. In fact, the use of new media for election coverage should be viewed as a double-edged sword capable of solving problems when properly harnessed and capable of creating problems if not properly harnessed. Nonetheless, the use of new media for elections has improved the reportage of elections directly from the centres' where elections are held. New media have encouraged participatory and user generated-content pattern of communication in the reportage of elections. In developing democracies like Nigeria, although the use of the new media for communicating election results is still evolving, it gives journalists, suitable platforms through which information relating to the conducts of elections results are sourced, spread and shared within a short space of time. In view of this, Attah (2011) argues that the unique attributes in the use of new media which allows users' interaction through which the exchange of information among users is easily achieved, encouraged the use of the new media for the coverage of elections.

New media are communication platforms which allow for social interaction among users. This is possible by using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Journalists use new media platforms to interact with voters and other individuals or groups who are observers of the election process. This offers the journalists' unique opportunities to have easy access to information concerning elections directly from individuals who took part in the election process. Ezeah, Asogwa and Obiorah (2013) observe that new media are useful

modern interactive communication channels through which people connect to one another, share ideas, videos, pictures, messages and information of common interest. New media allow users to engage in interactive communication from any part of the world they reside. McQuail (2010) argues that the new forms of communication allow for interaction among users. Regardless of the location of journalists, he or she can have easy access to information about elections as it is happening across several centres of the elections with the aid of new media.

Furthermore, Osahenye (2012) observes that new media platforms used for communication assist the users including journalists to meet their needs for communication. These needs could be educational, social, or for the sake of sourcing for information. Evidently, the use of the new media gives journalists capacity to source for information with ease during elections. The use of the new media for election coverage by journalists in Nigeria includes the use of the new media platforms as alternative platforms for sourcing information during elections (Quan-Haase and Young, 2010). New media are communication technologies which facilitate social interaction, and enable deliberation by journalists across boundaries, time and space. These technologies include: the Internet, mobile phones, computers, blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text) sharing tools, networking platforms (including Facebook), and virtual worlds (Bryer and Zavatarro, 2011).

It may be acknowledged that new media have enhanced election coverage everywhere journalists utilise them. Nevertheless, some level of caution may be required when using them due to their credibility concern. It is against this background that this paper critically appraises the utilisation of new media for election coverage by journalists in Nigeria.

### **Problem Statement**

New media have tremendous benefits that journalists can tap from especially in their role in election coverage. New media provide platforms that everyone with the requisite access can become a journalist, non-professional journalist in this instance; thereby, posing a serious credibility issues. Nevertheless, will it be more advantageous to use new media for election coverage than to ignore them because of the perceived challenges they may pose? However, election is a serious business which requires accurate and authentic coverage. Hence, some level of caution is required when using new media for election coverage. In view of this, it becomes necessary to qualitatively appraise the usage of new media for election coverage by mirroring the role of journalists in Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Establish the different types of new media for election coverage in Nigeria
2. Ascertain the impact of new media on election coverage in Nigeria
3. Determine the factors to consider when using new media for election coverage in Nigeria

### **Theoretical Constructs**

This paper is anchored on the Development Media and the Technological Determinism theories. The Development Media theory was adopted because according to Folarin (2005), the theory seeks to explain the normative behaviour of the media of communication in countries conventionally classified as developing democracies. The technological determinism theory was considered appropriate because it upholds the claim as advocated in this paper that technologies have the power to bring about changes in the coverage of elections by journalists.

The essence of the use of new media for election coverage is to enable journalists to have easy means of sourcing for information relating to election results through which they inform members of the public. This is also the main idea of development media theory as well as technological determinism theory. Development media theory focuses on the use of the media of communication for advancing national development, for socio-political autonomy and cultural identity of any developing country. It also aims at fostering political development and nation building. Furthermore, Okunna (2002) observes that the adoption of new media platforms by journalists and the use of the new media platforms to promote development are off-shoots of development media theory which advocates positive influence of the new media platforms on the political development process.

Technological determinism theory on the other hand, is another theory that provides a bearing for this paper since it encourages the uses of technologies for development. Although Sparks (2002) argues that for over the last 75 years, media effects researchers have usually lagged behind in studying the impact of the very latest media; but today, the impact of new media/ICTs in the life of man is very glaring as many studies like Obijiofor (2003), Olise (2011); and Pavlik and McIntosh (2011) have shown. In fact, the significance of this theory to this paper is that the use of new media for election coverage which bring about national development is possible because new media have the power to drive parties concerned to embrace change. This explains why Dominick (2011) states that technological determinism theory holds that technologies have overwhelming powers to drive human actions and historical changed.

### **Different Types of New Media for Election Coverage**

The various types of new media for election coverage include: Social media, the Internet, Digital Versatile Disc (DVD), Compact Disc Read Only Memory (CD-ROM), computers, among others.

) **Social Media:** These are online communication media that use web 2.0 technologies, which enable users to download, upload, interact, collaborate and share information in ways never imagined by man (Olise & Tebekaemi, 2015). Indeed, social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter among others have become veritable tools for election coverage globally. The unique thing about social media platforms is that they are available for both professional and non-professional journalists for the coverage of elections as observed and witnessed in Nigeria's 2019 general elections.

) **Internet:** One cannot talk of new media without mentioning the Internet. This is because the Internet is the major wonder of this technological age. The internet is basically a network of computer networks hooked together. It enables journalists who have access to computers or other new media platforms to communicate at electronic speed regardless of time, distance and geographical location.

) **Digital Television:** This is one new media which makes for the digitalisation of video signals in a compressed format; therefore, more information can be carried and disseminated. Apparently, the journalists can make use of digital television to independently source for election results on the spectrum space to target population.

) **Mobile Phones:** One booming technology for election coverage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the mobile phone. With a mobile phone that fits in the palms of a journalists and easily carried about since it is wireless, the journalists can communicate with voters and elections observers who are on ground at the polling units through calls, text messages and even send e-mails with enabled phones. In view of this, McMillan (2006) notes that the coming of the

mobile era has signalled further changes as mobile phone now becomes the receiver for everything from e-mail to news.

### **Impact of New Media on Election Coverage in Nigeria**

New media have in various ways been useful to journalists for election coverage. New media offer speedy and accurate dissemination of election results. It may be very difficult for anyone to argue the fact that new media have done more good than harm. Hence, Dennis and Merrill (2002) observe that insiders, who think about it, know that new media provide the means for better journalism. For those not professionally engaged in media, common sense tells that new media can only enhance what they have been receiving all along. The fact remains that journalists and everyone would continue to benefit from the usefulness of the new media for election coverage as encapsulated thus:

❖ **To improve coverage of elections:** New media platforms have made easier the tough task of election coverage. With new media platforms, journalists can easily gather information and data from different polling units at the same time. The trend in the use of new media platforms for election coverage by journalists in Nigeria has continued to impact the coverage of elections in Nigeria. This development is not peculiar to Nigeria as the use of the new media platforms for coverage of democratic processes like elections has come to be regarded as a global phenomenon. For instance, journalists who are armed with a smart phone with Internet access and data can easily connect with voters and election observers across different voting centres.

❖ **To complement the use of mainstream media:** The use of new media platforms for gathering and disseminating information give the journalists expanded platforms to use in gathering information and disseminating same to members of the public. This is made possible through media convergence, as the use of new media has the capacity for television and newspaper which are distinct media platforms to be combined. The mainstream communication platforms dominantly used by journalists in the twentieth century is not only been replaced with the use of modern communication technological channels and structures that define and typify modern communication system in the twenty-first century, but used in expanded form.

❖ **To substantiate election results:** Ruggerio (2000) argues that the emergence and use of new media platforms for election coverage to a large extent is due to the gratification the use of the new media platforms offers them. The February and March, 2019 general elections in Nigeria witnessed a high rate of citizen participation due to the use of new media by journalists in covering the election processes. This also enabled more participants to air their views with the use of new media platforms. Unofficial election results were released through the new media channels through which journalists sourced information on election results. This was done before the official release of all election results by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). As a result, journalists were able to verify results later released by INEC. Hence, there was little chance for the figures of votes to be easily manipulated by INEC officials.

❖ **To interact:** Journalists used new media platforms to share information on the elections and received feedbacks from the voters who were at different polling units for the elections. The use of the new media for election coverage is to enable journalists give up-to-date information on the election results after collaborating with those in the field. The interaction can also come in the form of tagging, rating, commenting, bookmarking, sharing, etc

Similarly, journalists want to be listened to and are eager to help shape the conducts of elections through connecting with voters and observers of elections using plain language which many considered as communicating genuinely and on what is relevant. Maggiani (2014) outline the five C's considered to be the primary use of new media, as thus:

**Conversation:** No longer is the communication one-way, broadcast or somehow sent to a passive audience. Journalists' purpose for the new media is because it affords them a two-way conversation, which is often multidimensional conversation.

**Contribution:** New media encourage contributions and reactions from voters and observers of elections. 'Encourage' is the key here; new media solicits an interaction, positive and negative, by making it easy to contribute.

**Collaboration:** New media promote an exchange of information between journalists and those involved in the election process. Journalists can easily create quick and simple collaborative platform which requires that information be organized and easily distributed during election coverage.

**Connection:** Accessing information on the Internet only takes a click. New media thrive on connections, within its Web vehicles and through links to other sites, resources, people, and automatic feeds. Journalists can even create their own personalized platforms of connections for election coverage.

**Community:** The fundamental characteristic of new media is the creation of community: a fellowship and relationship with others who share common attitudes, interests, and goals (such as friendship, professionalism, politics, and photography). Communities form quickly and communicate effectively. Communities build goodwill from members to the hosting organization and among members. While these communities are only virtual, with members seldom meeting each other in person, they are no less robust than the physical communities in which we live, and in many ways more robust from the simple fact that barriers are removed.

### **Factors to Consider when Using New Media for Election Coverage**

New media, no doubt, have enhanced and widened the frontiers of knowledge in the act, art and science of not just election coverage but virtually in the entire task performed by journalists. Be that as it may, some factors must be considered if desired results are to be achieved in the effective utilisation of new media for election coverage by journalists.

**Credibility Challenge:** Journalism practice demands a high degree of public trust. Hence, it is imperative for journalists to maintain a high level of professional and ethical standards. Truth/fact is the key in this regard. Unfortunately, most new media, especially the online news sites have been accused of lacking credibility in all ramifications. For instance, in 2018 during a press conference on Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Nigeria's Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed lamented that about 50% of the news making rounds online is fake and that the trend was influenced by social media/new media. For instance, Sahara Reporters, an online news outlet, was not too long ago, called to question when one of its report was denied and considered not to be credible by the Nigerian Army.

**Censorship:** This has to do with the process and practice of regulating information to be circulated to the general public. It is a way of ensuring that what is eventually published or aired or transmitted is free from libel, falsehood and fake. Censorship can also be described as the gauging or management of information between the government and the governed so that the boundaries that exist between both parties are mutually maintained for the benefits of both parties. Olise (2007) argues that this is the reason various government especially in Nigeria attempt to control information for the good of the public. With this, the government

in power can always use censorship as a means to clampdown on users of new media due to the flexibility and ubiquity concerns associated with new media.

**New Media may act as Distraction:** Election is a serious business. Therefore, any journalist covering election issues must be alert and active. However, using new media can be helpful even though they could also act as sources of distraction. On the Internet, imagine the pop ups while trying to confirm an urgent information. Similarly, while collation of results may be going on, calls, chatting etc may also act as forms of distraction to the journalist. Discipline and focus when absent while using new media for election coverage, distraction is inevitable.

**Killing Writing Skills:** Detailed information is usually required to explain the figures emanating from declared election results. Hence, the conventional media dwell on detailed information for clarity. On the other hand, most online news outlets/posts dwell on short form most times. This is because most new media promote short forms of writing, which in turn, negatively kill writing skills. In the old media era, most journalists were described as prolific writers. The trend may have reduced today due to the introduction of new media outlets/tools.

**Promotion of Fake News:** New media like social media platforms are usually considered as carriers of fake news. This may be attributed to the fact that new media encourage citizen journalism practice, a form of journalism that encourages citizen participation in news acquisition and dissemination. Finacialnigeria.com (2017) reveals that Fast Draft News, a non-profit organisation working with news organisations to fight fake news identified seven types of contents categorised under misinformation and disinformation as: fabricated content, manipulated content, impostor content, misleading content, false context and satire or parody. Recall the Senator Dino Meleya's certificate saga. Was it a case of fake or real news?

**Social Media Hype:** Social media have created more challenges than solutions in a way especially in election coverage in Nigeria. For example, the 'Third Force' won the 2019 Presidential election in Nigeria on social media platforms even before the election was conducted, whereas that was not reality. There were those who relied heavily on their huge members of friends and followers on social media platforms to win elections in Nigeria, which at the end all got it wrong. This is because social media platforms, if not properly checked are capable of misleading users into believing virtual reality against physical and obvious realities.

### **Review of Empirical Studies**

New media have been considered useful in improving the coverage of elections and public opinion. For instance, McGregor (2019) investigated how journalists use a particular new media like social media to represent and reflect public opinion during elections through interviews and content analysis. It was found that although social media users do not actually reflect the electorates, journalists were found to report online sentiments and trends as a form of public opinion that services the narrative and complements survey polling quotes. Furthermore, the study by McGregor indicated that journalists were worried about over reliance on social media, a type of new media, for election coverage. This is in consonance with the early study by Dubois, Gruzd and Jacobson (2018) which found that new media users are not even aware that journalists use their social media data to infer public opinion on elections and politics. Dubois, Gruzd and Jacobson in their online survey of Canadian adults also discovered that the frequency of political posting is positively related to acceptance of this emerging journalistic practice. The implication of their findings was that some citizens want to be heard publicly on new media while others do not. New media have also been found to have contributed to the success of election especially in Nigeria. This is because Obboh (2016) argues that journalists use new media to give adequate publicity to election

issues in Nigeria. For example, Maamaa and Akurega (2017) while investigating the influence of new media on the success of the 2015 general elections in North Central Nigeria, found that journalists utilised new media to enhance their roles in the election coverage. Maamaa and Akurega's study revealed that journalists' use of new media influence was obvious in the areas of education and mobilisation of electorates, reportage of electoral irregularities as well as the effective and early release of election results. Similarly, Idi (2017) study discovered that new media were used more by media practitioners in elections as it concerns more on conflict related matters than in issues like voters' education in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

It is evident that the use of new media by journalists for election coverage in Nigeria is a welcome idea despite the issues of censorship, social media hype, credibility, distraction, writing skills and the promotion of fake news. This is because using new media for election coverage would hasten socio-political development and sustenance of democratic process. Nevertheless, journalists must be aware that using new media for election coverage is not an easy task. Thus, they must adhere strictly to the principles and philosophy of social responsibility.

The use of new media platforms for election coverage by journalists will continue to gain more ground because of the possibility of immediate feedback, interactivity, speed in the exchange of information, affordability and availability in accessing information and the high degree in the freedom of expression which new media promote.

### **Recommendations**

The followings are suggested as way of encouraging the use of new media for election coverage in Nigeria.

1. Journalists involved in election coverage in this era of new media must double check their facts before they publish the information so as to enhance the credibility and readability of their new media platform. All information must be verified no matter the urgency. It is honourable to be late with facts/truth than to be early with fake news. Furthermore, there is need for all those using new media to be focused. One thing at a time should be the watchword. Achieve the aim of using new media to cover the election. Thereafter, play games with your mobile devices, reply text messages, chat etc.
2. As new media continue to encourage short form of writing, journalists should be dynamic. In essence, they should not completely ignore the traditional act of lengthy writing skill which appears to be the hub of journalism practice. This is because the pen will continue to be mightier than the sword.
3. Professional and regulatory bodies like Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), Nigerian Press Council (NPI) etc should work out modalities to fashion out a road map to guide and
4. regulate online news outlets especially the citizens involve in citizen journalism practice with the aid of new media in order to curb tame the spread of fake news among other unethical practices.

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