

Research Article

The Changing Nature of Electioneering Campaigns in the Digital Media Era: What is the Future for Nigeria's Nascent Democracy

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2395.3810.201907>

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How to cite this article:

Eucharia O. The Changing nature of Electioneering Campaigns in the digital Media era: What future for Nigeria's Nascent Democracy. *J Adv Res Jnl Mass Comm* 2019; 6(4): 11-17

Date of Submission: 2019-12-08

Date of Acceptance: 2019-12-30

A B S T R A C T

Advancements in information and communication technologies have seriously impacted on electioneering campaigns globally. This was evidenced when the former United States Presidents, Barack Obama deployed digital media as campaign tools in his 2008 presidential election. In Nigeria, President Goodluck Jonathan also deployed it in his 2011 presidential election. Today, digital media have become prominent communication tools through which politicians and political parties solicit votes from the electorate. The essence of this study was to determine the impact of digital media-powered electioneering campaign messages on people of voting age. A total of 385 voters were surveyed using the questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. It was found that while digital media-powered electioneering campaign messages significantly correlate perception about politicians and political participation, they did not correlate voter decision. The theoretical and practical implications of these results have been explored.

Keywords: Digital Media, Election, Campaigns, Democracy and Nigeria

Introduction

Advancements in information and communication technologies have seriously impacted on electioneering campaigns globally. Before the emergence of digital media, electioneering campaigns were done through traditional media like radio TV, newspapers and magazines. During that time also, public speaking gathering were essential platforms for electioneering campaigns. Overall, the scope of political communication has changed significantly. Those who do not have the digital media skills have no business remaining in politics. Ezeah and Gever (2016) corroborate that political communication has expressed many changes. According to them, the approaches used in the appr1960s,1970s and 1980s, are not the same as

what is obtainable today. Kumar (2017) in commenting on the centrality of political communication notes that it sets the stage for a conversation between the political leaders and masses. He adds that a useful strategy of political communication would be one that succeeds in mobilizing the masses for achieving the desired political objective. Suffice it to say that an effective political communication strategy is that which achieves the set political target, then the channel of such communication is an essential consideration.

Political actors appear to have realized the truism in this statement as they make frantic efforts to catch up with the changing trends in human communication. Consequently, they have also changed their electioneering campaign

strategies to meet up with the demand so the digital media era. This was evidenced when the former United States Presidents, Barack Obama deployed digital media as campaign tools in his 2008 presidential election. In Nigeria, President Goodluck Jonathan also deployed it in his 2011 presidential election. Also, during the 2019 presidential election, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar declared his intention to join the presidential race through the Facebook. Atiku Abubakar also use the Facebook for his presidential campaigns. Today, digital media have become prominent communication tools through which politicians and political parties solicit votes from the electorate. Much as digital media have been found useful for reaching electorate, thus widening the democratic space, serious issues have been raised regarding the manner of political messages that are communicated through these less regulated media options. The competition for electorate attention has been shifted to mediated channels. Political gladiators are fully aware of the changing nature of electorate sources of information and have responded accordingly. Such caveats have also raised concerns regarding the future of nascent democracies like Nigeria's. In this study, the researcher examined the changing nature of electioneering campaigns in the digital Media era with particular attention on how such changes impact on the future of Nigeria's democracy. What future for Nigeria's Nascent Democracy

Objectives and Significance

The objective of this study was to ascertain the changing nature of electioneering campaigns. Therefore, this study seeks answers to following questions: What is the relationship between exposure to election campaigns messages through digital media voter perception of political candidates? What is the relationship between exposure to election campaigns messages through digital media voter participation at during election? What is the relationship between exposure to election campaigns messages through digital media voter choice of candidates? The outcome of this study will contribute to our understanding of the impact of digital media on the future of democracy in Africa and the world at large. The results of this study also have theoretical relevance because its findings could be useful for theory testing as well as formulating new ones.

Overview of Digital Media

Digital media describe media that are encoded in formats that are compatible with machine format. They media which content are in machine-readable format. Digital media allow users create contents, view them, make changes were need be, stored them on digital electronic devices as well as distribute same. The World Economic Forum (2016) defines digital media as products and services that emerge from the media, information and entertainment industry and its subsectors. It adds that such platforms digitized

content (e.g. text, audio, video and images), are digital platforms (e.g. websites and applications), and services (e.g. information, entertainment and communication) that can be accessed and consumed using diverse digital devices. It posts further that people's online behaviours shape their digital identities. Individuals may show different behaviour patterns in different contexts (e.g. private versus professional), which may be described as different digital personae. Some of the digital media include, video game, digital video, social media, software, digital images, mobile phone, web pages and websites and data and databases, digital audio, such as MP3 and electronic books. Dewar (1998) says that digital media have resulted a substantial impact on different aspects of the society. He adds that alongside with the Internet and personal computing, digital media platform have led to disruptive innovation in commerce and politics, publishing, journalism, education, public relations as well as entertainment (see also Balbi, & Magaouda, 2018). The digital media era has substantially changed the patter of information consumption among people of the world. People now have different options through which they consume media content. Most of these options are largely dependent on digital media. The World Economic Forum (2016) identifies the following as defining communication pattern in the digital media era:

Mobile: The mobile phone is a very important channel of communication. More and more people now spend time communicating through the mobile phone. People now spend an average of two hours every day on the mobile web, one-third of their total online time, with millennials and digital media users in emerging countries emerging countries leading the mobile revolution. The World Economic Forum adds that mobile usage is less dependent on place and time, and devices are more affordable than laptops/personal computers (PCs).

Social and interactive: Communication has become more interactive in the digital media era than ever before. With the emergence of web 2.0 and eventually social media, people now interact in a situation where each person is a sender and a receiver at the same time. Meaning creation and sharing have not only become more instantaneous than anybody can explain with words.

Flexible and personalized: In the digital era, users can have a more active role and more control over the digital media contents they use and engage, in sharp contrast with traditional media. User accounts and cookies allow users to customize their contents displayed concerning user characteristics and usage patterns.

Fast, instant and convenient: With the Internet and new technologies (hardware and software) communication is fast and more convenient than before. This gives room for easier access and use, and makes contents richer.

More content: There is more content now than before. This is because as the simplicity in the creation and distribution of contents have led to an exponential increase in contents generated. There also exists Content different categories of contents on different issues than ever before.

Collective: The digital media have promoted collective action. There exists chains in communicating messages. There is higher possibility to, share, recommend, connect and communicate creates a collective experience that shapes not only behaviours and preferences, but also a collective consciousness of shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes.

Fragmented and multi-channel: The huge number of channels and creators makes content ever more fragmented. Users access multiple platforms from multiple devices. Adapting content to these multiple platforms becomes imperative.

Electioneering Campaigns in the Digital Media

Elections are very important in any democracy. It is through elections that leaders are recruited. In representative democracies, elections are very critical because they are at the heart of the process that determines those who will be given the authority to lead others to shared prosperity and greatness. Wojtasik (2013) says that elections are a procedure typical for democratic systems. Although election are important, competitive elections are often better for advancing the course of democracy. When elections are competitive, the best emerge and the masses and indeed, the general country benefits. Wojtasik corroborates that competitive elections determine the democratic legitimization of the exercise of public authority, and through this legitimizing criterion will be different from the non-competitive selection methods. Wojtasik adds that competition makes ensure legitimacy of decisions taken by the elected representative, provided all adults are eligible to participate in the elections. The essential features of elections in democratic systems are: uncertainty of the electoral outcome, which is based only on the decision of the electorate, possibility of a real change of power and formation of a de facto division into those in power and the opposition and when a change in power should take place (Wojtasik, 2013). According to Heywood (2000), mutual influence of the citizens and those in power, as well as elites and the masses is ensured through elections. Politicians often embark on electioneering campaigns to seek the mandate of the voters to govern.

Electioneering campaigns describe the process through which political actors seek to convince the electorate to cast their votes for them. It is a process by which politicians and political parties canvass for votes from electorate. Uzonwanne, Ezenekwe and Iregbenu (2016) say that

electioneering campaign is a process which the law permit a candidate to ascertain an elective office and to sensitize the populace on his party's manifesto. They add that If such a candidate has clout, his pedigree comes to play as a selling point. Scholars (Ian, 2001; Ryan, 2012; Knapp, and Wright, 2006) say that different of approaches are used in politics during electioneering campaigns. These include promoting one's own political views among people, negotiation with other political actors, formulating policies, making laws, and exercising power, as well as competition against opposition. Electioneering campaigns are capital intensive. This partly explains why politicians normally pool their resource together during electioneering campaigns. For example, as a build-up to the 2015 general election in Nigeria, the then ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) organized a dinner to raise funds for the reelection of Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, the 21 PDP-controlled states donated more than N1 billion. Private firms were also part of the donors. Unnamed oil and gas sector players were said to have donated N5 billion to the campaign; "those in Real Estate and Building donated N4bn; Transport and Aviation, N1bn; Food and Agriculture, N500m; Power, N500m; Construction, N310m; Road Construction, N250m; National Automotive Association, N450m; and Shelter Development Limited, N250m"(Olalekan, 2014). Although the importance of electioneering campaigns have remained the same, approaches to electioneering campaigns have changed substantially as a result of digital media. Politicians have realized that the voters of the 21st century are very complex and digital media friendly. Consequently, they have also changed their approaches to tally with needs of the voters. Uzonwanne et al, (2016) says that electioneering publicity is rampantly found in media and particularly, in the social networks that enjoy a boom during electioneering seasons. Ezeah and Gever (2016) carried out a study to examine the emerging trends in political communication and reported that the reliance on digital media by political actors, journalists and the audience are essential characteristics of the 21st century politicking. Ezeah and Gever further reported that the audience have changed from being passive receivers of political communication to active senders of political information. Jungherr (2016) carried out a study to examine the use of digital media for electioneering campaigns and reported that German political parties use digital tools for electioneering campaigns in four broad ways like presence in information spaces online, work routines, organizational structures, support in resource collection and allocation, as well as symbolic applications. Evidence in literature (Anstead & Chadwick; 2009; Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2014; Bennett, & Segerberg 2013; Bimber, Flanagan & Stohl. 2012; Chadwick, 2011; Chadwick, 2013; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Earl, & Kimport, 2011) point to the fact

that electioneering campaigns have changed significantly and that digital media are now playing essential roles in the party campaign processes. For example, Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) reported that the application of digital media during the 2008 US presidential elections by Obama result to a virtual community of supporters that led to 3.1 million contributor groups as well as more than 5 million volunteers. In other words, digital media played a substantial role in determining the outcome of elections in United State of America in 2008. Stier, Bleier, Lietz and Strohmaier (2018) examined the application of digital media for political communication and reported that politicians apply digital media tools in electioneering so as to achieve their political aims. Bright, Hale, Ganesh, Bulovsky, Margetts, Howard, (2017) did a study of 2015 and 2017 elections in the United Kingdom and reported that digital media electioneering campaigning significantly result to a corresponding influence on voting pattern. Chen (2010) investigated the application of digital media in electioneering campaigns using three national election campaigns in three countries namely Australia in 2007 and Canada and New Zealand in 2008. The researcher reported that digital media have been used at all levels of electioneering campaigns in all the elections studied. Bartels and Burgess (2002) reported that partisan bias is a very strong variable in deciding voter perception and eventual voting decision. Based on the literature above and the objectives of this study, the researcher formulated the below hypotheses:

H₁: There is a significant relationship between exposure to election campaigns messages through digital media voter perception of political candidates.

H₂: There is a significant relationship between exposure to election campaigns messages through digital media and voter participation at during election.

H₃: There is a significant relationship between exposure to election campaigns messages through digital media voter choice of candidates.

Theoretical Framework

This study found expression social information processing theory. The theory was propounded by Walther Joseph (1992). It explains how people get to familiarize with one through online channels and how they develop and manage relationships in a digital media environment (Walther, 1992). The SIPT makes use of verbal and temporal cues as essential influences on relationship formation (Walther, 1992). The theory's premise is based on both sets of cues as parameters under which communication and technology may together produce impersonal, interpersonal, or hyperpersonal relationships (Walther, 1996). The researcher found this theory useful because through digital media platforms,

electioneering campaigns could be carried out. The typical face-to-face electioneering campaigns that take place are now replicated through digital media platforms. Therefore, the researcher used this theory to explain how digital media platforms now serve as avenues for electioneering campaigns.

Materials and Methods

The researcher adopted survey research design to achieve the objective of the study. The study was conducted in Enugu State Nigeria. The population was all the registered voters

in Enugu State. The total number of voters in Enugu State according to the Independent National Electoral Commission (2018) is 1,944,016. The sample size of 385 voters was selected. The sample was selected using the Australian calculator for determining sample size. The purposive sample technique was used to sample registered voters who collected their voter cards. The choice purposive sampling was to ensure that only voters who collected their voter cards were part of the study as only such voters stood the chance of voting. This is because not all the registered voters eventually collected their voters cards. The questionnaire was used as the instrument for data collection. The questionnaire was validated by three communication experts at the Department of Mass Communication, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The test re-test approach was used to ascertain the reliability of the instrument. The outcome yielded a correlation coefficient of .88. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were used in the analysis of data for the study. Results were presented in tables.

Results

A total of 385 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents. However, 363 copies were filled and returned. This represents 94% returned rate. The sample was 61% and 39% female. The mean age of the respondents was 30 (range 19 years and 40). 89% of the sample were experienced voters while 19% were first time voters. The results of the in table above, the researcher sought to ascertain the relationship between voter exposure to electioneering campaigns messages through digital media and voter perception concerning politicians. The result of the correlation analysis above showed that significant relationship exists between exposure to electioneering campaign messages through digital media and voter perception concerning candidate promise in the area of capacity, credibility and policy. Therefore, first hypothesis was supported and the researcher concludes that digital media electioneering campaigns messages are associated with perception about political candidates. To ascertain the relationship between exposure to electioneering campaign

Table 1. Relationship between Exposure to Election Campaigns Messages Through Digital Media Voter Perception of Political Candidates

S.No	Item	r	p. value	Decision
1	Exposure to electioneering messages	.733*	0.001	Sig
2	Perception about candidates' credibility	.897*	0.001	Sig
3	Perception about candidates' competence	.786*	0.001	Sig
4	Perception about candidates policy stand	.907*	0.001	Sig
5	Perception about candidates' antecedent	.890*	0.001	Sig

Table 2. Relationship between Exposure to Election Campaigns Messages through Digital Media Voter Political Participation

S.No	Item	r	p. value	Decision
1	Exposure to electioneering messages	.811*	0.001	Sig
2	Turning out to vote	.792*	0.001	Sig
3	Participation in online political discussion	.706*	0.001	Sig
4	Sharing electioneering messages through digital media	.802*	0.001	Sig

Table 3. Relationship between Exposure to Election Campaigns Messages Through Digital Media Voter Choice of Candidates

S.No	Item	r	p. value	Decision
1	Exposure to electioneering messages	.811*	0.001	Sig
2	Choice of candidate	.792*	0.001	Not Sig
3	Religion of candidate	.796*	0.001	Sig
4	Ethnicity of candidate	.806*	0.001	Sig
5	Party identification	.913*	0.001	Sig
6	Candidates' personal characteristics	.717*	0.001	Not Sig
7	Candidates' manifestoes	.999*	0.001	Sig

messages through digital media and participation during elections, table two was computed:

In table two above, the researcher sought to ascertain the relationship between voter exposure to electioneering campaigns messages through digital media and voter political participation. Political participation was measured using three broad indicators like voter turnout, engagement in political discourse as well as promoting electioneering messages using digital media platforms. It was found that when voters are exposed to electioneering messages through digital media, it could lead to a corresponding possibility to turn out to vote for candidate of their choice. It could also influence their involvement in political discourse and even the promotion of electioneering messages. Consequently, the second hypothesis was supported and the researcher conclude that digital media electioneering campaign messages are associated with political participation.

In table three above, the researcher sought to ascertain

relationship between digital media and voting behaviour. The result showed that exposure to electioneering campaign messages does not influence the choice of candidate during an election. Instead, party identification, religion and ethnic affiliation determine the choice of candidate to vote during an election. Therefore, the third hypothesis was not supported and the researcher concludes that exposure to digital media electioneering messages does not correlate choice of candidate.

Discussion of Findings

In this study, the researcher examined, electioneering campaigns in the digital media era. Three research questions and three hypotheses guided the study. The result of the study revealed that digital media platforms now essential component of the 21st century politicking. In particular, it was found that exposure to digital media electioneering campaign messages has a significant impact on voters in the areas of perceptions about politicians as well as political

participation. This means that digital media platforms are essential tool shaping political views as well as enhancing political participation. The result of this study is consistent with other scholars (Anstead & O'Loughlin, 2014; Bennett, & Segerberg 2013; Bimber, Flanagan & Stohl. 2012; Chadwick 2011; Chadwick 2013; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011) who found that digital media significantly impact on electoral processes. However, the current study did not find evidence suggesting that exposure to digital media electioneering campaign messages is associated with voter decision. This is aspect of the result is contrary to that of Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez (2011) who found that digital media electioneering campaign messages significantly correlated voting decision. Instead, we found that factors like party identification, religion, and ethnicity play critical role when voters make a decision of who to vote at an election. This aspect of the current study is similar to that of previous researchers (Bartels, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006) who reported that partisan bias significantly correlate information interpretation and eventual voting behaviour. Based on the results of this study, it can be said that while digital media platforms have been successful in shaping political opinion and driving political participation, the same thing cannot be said of voter decision. Overall, digital media platforms are now essential communication tools in 21st century politicking.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the researcher concludes that digital media are now playing essential roles in 21st century politicking. The increasing acceptance and use of digital media platforms make them good tools for electioneering campaigns. While such platforms are yet to solely and completely influence voter decision, they are currently shaping public opinion and triggering political participation. Political actors, media practitioners and political communication researchers must, therefore change with the current trend in communication platforms among people. This study makes practical, theoretical and scholarly contributions. In practical terms, the results of this study could be useful for designing and implementing electioneering communication in nascent democracies like Nigeria. This result has also contributed to our understanding of social information processing theory by showing how digital media platforms have served as avenues for building communication relationship between political actors and the voting public. Therefore, the results have shown that the social information processing theory could be a useful framework for investigating the application of digital media platforms for electioneering campaigns. Finally, these results have added to existing literature concerning the impact of digital media in the 21st century society. Three broad recommendations are suggested. First, political actors should continue to deploy digital media in

their electioneering campaigns. In doing so, however, care should be taken to understanding the party identification of the target voters so as to better achieve their goals of such campaigns. In the second place, voter segmentation is very cardinal in the 21st century politicking. Segmentation variables could include party identification, ethnicity as well as religion. Such knowledge could provide a guide in designing electioneering messages. Finally, further studies should be replicated in other developing countries for better understanding.

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