Social Media and Public Participation in Nigeria: Challenges and Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

The advent of social media in the world of information has added a very unique dimension to the participation of more people in those affairs that particularly has direct effects to their day-to-day lives and survival. Social media has already occupied those spaces that were hitherto un-occupied by the owned media. This is against the back drop of the aftermath effects of social media on regime change in the world, particularly the Arab springs and other hot spots in the world. This has equally brought human race together in a more globalised world. The aim of this paper is to look at social media and public participation in Nigeria, vis-à-vis the challenges and possibilities. The paper shall be pivoted on the theory of participatory democracy. It is mainly a qualitative paper; hence no primary data will be made used of.

Key words: Social media, public participation, participatory democracy, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and You Tube, are increasingly been adopted by politicians, political activists and social movements as a means of engaging, organising and communicating with citizens worldwide (Loader and Mercea2012).

It is therefore no longer strange to locate the face book accounts, or the twitter handles of political figures such as the presidents, the prime ministers, cabinet members, civil right activists, and engages them as frequently as the case may be.

This application provides an unbridled opportunity for the users to have direct conversation with one another even when they are millions of miles apart from one another. It has therefore taken over those spaces that were before now left un-explored by the owned media, such as the radio, the television, the newspapers and others.

Nigeria as a nation-state formerly joined the other comity of nations on social media with the lunch and approval of licences to Global Satellite Mobile (GSM) network service providers by the administration of Olusegun Obasanjo in the year 2000 (Punch,2013).

The introduction of social media into the information space in Nigeria is now been use for various means in public participation by the citizens, such as canvassing for votes in elections, showing either support or displeasure towards the government and government policies, such as occupy Nigeria effort on the increase in fuel price protest, enlightenments of the people on health related issues such as the dreaded Ebola virus, Hiv /aids and others. In essence, the advent of social media in Nigeria information space could be said to have increase the level of public participation of the citizens in one way or the other.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The appropriate theoretical frame work that this paper will be built on is the participatory democracy theory. According to Aragon and Sanchez (2008) participatory democracy is a process emphasizing the broad participation of constituencies in the direction and operation of political system. The etymological root of democracy, Greek demos and kratos simply implies that the people are in power meaning that all democracies are participatory. However, participatory democracy tends to advocate more involved forms of citizen participation than traditional representative democracy. Participatory democracy strives to create opportunities for all members of a population to make meaningful contributions to decision making and seeks to broaden the range of people who have access to such opportunities.

Participatory democracy is a process of collective decision making that combines the elements from both the direct and the representative democracy. Citizens have the power to decide on policy proposals and the politicians only assume the role of public policy implementers. The electorates can monitor the politicians' performance simply by comparing citizens' proposals and wishes with the actual policies being executed by the politicians. In view of this, the absolute powers enjoy by the politician is severely restricted to the barest minimum (Aragon and Sanchez, 2008).

According to Adegboye (2013:241-250) political variants of participatory democracy include consensus democracy, deliberative democracy, demarchy, and grassroots democracy. Deliberative democracy differs from traditional democratic theory in the sense that authentic deliberation, not mere voting, is the primary source of a law and legitimacy. Any law or conclusion without authentic deliberation is therefore illegitimate, null and void and of no effects as far as deliberative democracy is concerned.

Deliberative democracy adopts the elements of both consensus decision making and majority rule. When practiced by small groups, it is possible for decision making to be both fully participatory and deliberative. But for large political entities, the democratic reform dilemma makes it difficult for any system of decision making based on political equality to involve both deliberation and inclusive participation (Adegboye 2013).

CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA

Inadequate electricity supply

This possesses a major threat to the ability of most citizens, not only in ordinary day-to-day conversation via the cell phone, but also the opportunity to have access to social media applications too.

This is due mainly to the inability of successive of successive administrations in the country to provide adequate electricity supply to the citizens. The needed megawatts of electricity in Nigeria by 2020 have been estimated around 40,000 megawatts (Africacheck, 2013). However, the country currently only generates 2.628.6 megawatts (Punch, 2014). Hence, communication appliances are available, but the needed electricity to power them is not available.

High cost of tariffs

Closely related to the problem of inadequate power supply, is the expensive call rate/ high tariff on call rate/high tariff on services. A good number of the service providers, such as MTN, Air tell, Visafone, Globacom, Etisalat and others relies heavily on alternative power supply such electricity generators, diesel, petrol and others in other to remain in business.

According to the Manufacturers Association of Nigeria (MAN), over 50% of Nigeria's 160 million people receive no electricity at all. 40% of the production cost of manufacturing goes into the provision of electricity, compare to 5-10% in other similar economies (Guardian, 2013).

In doing this, the huge liabilities that are subsequently inquired from the service and maintenance of these alternative power supplies are transfer to the ordinary citizens who forms the main consumers. This has deterred more people from the use of the social media.

Poor coverage

Coverage areas, this is spatially uneven particularly in the rural areas for example, the Global Satellite Mobile (GSM) network is also underdeveloped particularly in the rural communities, and therefore citizens are left out of the loop. Similarly, in urban areas, the cell phone/internet coverage is uneven, particularly in developing countries, such as Nigeria. Thus, this makes the use of social media to be restricted among most subscribers (Punch, 2013).

According to Njoku (2007) most subscribers have often complaints also about the rates of drop call charges that are not refunded to the customers. A situation that leads to frustration and anguish among most Nigerians.

Government Perception

The Nigerian government like some other governments in the world, often feels that the power of the state is gradually been eroded with the advent of the social media. The social media is now been embraced by more and more people, particularly the youth (Loader and Mercea2012).

Nigeria situation even become more pertinent judging from the long years of military rule which do not accommodate any dissenting voices or opinions. Thus, criticism of government policies on the social media is often perceived as an unpatriotic exercise, even when they are being done objectively.

This has not encouraged citizens to offer constructive ideas on how to move the nation forward on the social media. Some citizens have even become apolitical in any government policies. Leading to the growing list of people been disenchanted in governance.

Furthermore, there has also been reported abused on the use of social media by the citizens in sharing unverified and wrong information to the public. These in most cases has caused panic, fear and anxiety among citizens, through the raising of false alarms like armed robbery on the high ways, car accidents that are non- existence and so on.

OPPORTUNITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN NIGERIA
Better space for engagement

The introduction of social media into the Nigerian information space, has led to more and better participation/engagement of the citizens in governance. Citizens now use the social media applications to commend and condemn the activities of government official. The medium is also been use to canvass for votes in elections and voice out political opinions and ideologies (Study mode, 2012).

In essence, it has provided a veritable platform for the citizens to contribute positively to governance in their local community, local government, state and national government. They

are now in a better position than before to express their opinion even in the comfort of their houses and not necessarily going on public protest or riots.

Moved citizens closer to the government

The phenomenon has also moved the citizens closer to the government. This is in view of the fact that bureaucratic barriers that will entail booking an appointment with their representatives have been removed. The government and the governed can now discuss freely on public policies and make their opinion known to their elected representative without any form of intimidation or harassment (World Bank, 2013).

The advent of social media has also reduced drastically the burden of travelling long distance in other to engage public representatives. The distance has been reduced to the barest minimum, and the people can discuss with their representative even on audio-visual devices. In essence, less energy, time and cost are dissipated by citizens in engaging with their representatives.

Reduction of anarchy, protest and riots

Social media has also reduced drastically the incidence of anarchy and violence protest. It has provided the public with avenues to vent their anger and disappointment on government programmes and policies, via the face book, twitter and you tube, not necessarily taking to the street to destroy public infrastructures (Kombol, 2014).

Furthermore, protests have become better organise, more efficient and effective. This is in view of the fact that the message get faster across space and time to the target audience and participants.

Means of public enlightenment

The government is also better positioned than before to explain and enlightened citizens on government policies and programmes, such as the enlightenments on health issue, like the dreaded Ebola virus, security related issues like the efforts of government in curbing the Boko haram insurgence in north-east Nigeria and a host of other government activities and programmes (Placing 2013).

The space created by this enlightenment has not only eased the spread of information by the government to the citizens, but it has also spread political awareness, consciousness and civic education.

It is also being adopted to canvass for votes among political parties, spread party manifestoes, policies and programmes. Hence more political parties have equally created their official face book accounts, twitter handles and have messages on the you tube.

Feedback mechanism

Feedback mechanism on government programmes and policies has also been further enhanced with the introduction of social media apparatus. Issues that would have taken many weeks before reactions and feedbacks are received from the citizens are now been received by government in minutes within the revelation of such programmes. In essence, it is a case of instance actions and reactions by both the representatives and the citizens respectively (Channels TV, 2013).

Furthermore, the advent of social media has impacted greatly on the practice of journalism. Journalists do not just inform their audience or readers alone, but are now better placed to also

have both the positive and negative feedback and responses from their ardent listening citizens.

Employment opportunities
This has been enhanced with the advent of the social media. A good number of Nigerians, particularly the youth have become actively engaged. These they do by helping to repair and service damaged cell phone and lap top, helping the non-computer literates to create web pages, opening twitter handles and face book accounts for money. Others are also engaged in the sales of air time and recharged cards. In other word, it has also boosted the economy of the country and reduced crime rate (Academia2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Proceeding from the above, it is obvious that there are challenges and opportunities for social media applications in Nigeria. However, in other to improve on the present level of from efficiency to effectiveness this paper suggest the following.

One, the Federal Ministry of Power and Mines, must as a matter of urgency put all hands on decks and work out a pragmatic, realistic and workable solution to the ever presence epileptic power supply in the country. This will not only have direct impact on the effective usage of social media applications, but will also improve greatly the economic situation of the citizens.
Two, the Federal Ministry of Education, must equally come up with a reliable National Policy on Information Communication Technology (ICT). This is still absent in the education sector in Nigeria. This has to start from the elementary schools to the tertiary institution. What we presently have is an uncoordinated effort by some private school to implement what they thought is best for their students (UKessays2014).

This will make more citizens to become computer/ICT literate, and will be in better positions to avail themselves of the vast opportunities that comes with the social media applications.

Third, the service providers such as MTN, Cell tell, Globacom, Viasfone, Etisalat and others must not only advertise better and sophisticated technology to the consumers. They must be seen to be improving and constantly upgrading obsolete technology in their companies. They should also seek ways of further reducing their tariffs, as more and more citizens' groan under these burdensome tariffs. Doing this will not only improve the accessibility of the people to social media, but will also improve the affordability too.

CONCLUSION

The paper set out with the aim of looking at the challenges and the opportunities of social media in public participation in Nigeria. It provided an introduction on the subject matter and equally backed up the work with the theory of participatory democracy, as this is one of the essences of making use of the social media, for citizens to participate effectively in governance.

The work went on to explain some of the challenges and opportunity to Social Media and Public Participation in Nigeria. Provided some recommendations that if taken seriously by the government and the service providers will not only make more Nigerians benefit from social media applications, but will equally help them to become active citizens, that is also able to benefit from participatory democracy. After all, democracy and public participation is all about the people, and not the government.

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