

# New Communication Technologies and A Paradigm Shift of Political Communication in Nigeria: A Discourse on the 2011/2015 Presidential Elections

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**Abstract** - Politics involves who gets what, when and how. For political organizations to achieve this and for the masses to understand the process, political communication is involved. There used to be an over reliance on the traditional mass media which limited the scope of political communication by restricting politicians and political parties and giving the masses a very little or no platform for participation. Hinged on the technological determinism theory, this paper builds upon how the emergence of the new media, or better, the new communication technologies have afforded substantial social effects in society. It has made political communication migrate from what used to be asymmetrical to a symmetrical or participatory exercise. The use of the new media as a tool for political communication has become a common phenomenon among Nigerian politicians to reach across diverse voters and prospective ones. This paper is a conceptual review of literature which unravels political communication in view of the newer digital channels like the social media, the internet and mobile telecommunication tools; its strengths and challenges to overcome; its role in sociotechnical change and how these new communication technologies have aided political communication and have been used by politicians in Nigeria particularly, during the 2011 and 2015 general elections.

**Keywords** – political communication, new communication technologies, digital channels, sociotechnical change.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Information rules the world today. However, being practically involved in the communication process rather than be passively exposed to information makes a lot of difference. Communication in politics is an interactive process involving the transmission or exchange of information among the actors or elements of political communication; the politicians, the news media and the public. This process operates down-wards from governing institutions towards citizens, horizontally in linkages among political actors, and also upwards from public opinion towards authorities (McNair, 2003; Norris, 2004). However, there must be a medium which would serve as a sphere where different ideas and views of these three groups of actors who have a right to publicly speak about politics meet.

In the past, political organizations highly depended on only the traditional media and so did the masses. But in the past decade, new technologies that provide numerous

channels through internet access have emerged. These technologies have made political communication migrate from the top-down symmetrical flow to a balanced flow because of citizen participation. “Participation” in this sense implies involvement in formal political activities (voting, standing for election, etc.) and non-party political activism, advocacy, and public debate (OpCit Research, 2013). The crux of this is the participation of the citizenry in governance.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The New Communication Technologies*

The development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) has moved across different stages and in different eras. From the conventional media, the radio and television, the world has witnessed advancements in technology resulting in better means of getting tasks done. Put differently, any communication technology was once new at a point in time and it had its way of influencing positively, the communication process in any society where it was introduced. In this era, the new communication technologies cover any product that will receive, store, retrieve, manipulate or transmit information electronically in a digital form; for example, personal computers, digital television, email, robots, and so on, which allow people and organizations to communicate and share information digitally (Afriyie, 2012). The introduction of communication technologies usually, causes a lot of improvement on what has been, therefore, the major differences between digital communication and the traditional electronic communication are in degree or extent of performance rather than their physical makeup.

According to Abramson, Arterton, and Orren (1988), such uniqueness that new communication technologies exhibit extends to three capacities which include:

- **Data storage and management** – The capacity for information gathering is considerably enhanced given the high volume of personalized data that the Internet makes possible to store and the speed at which it can be retrieved.
- **Message scope** – The immediacy of the Internet and its global reach mean that organizations capacity to

reach both a much wider mass audience and also their target audience is greatly improved.

- **Interactivity** – The decentralization and user control over the messages being sent and received allow for multi-directional links between organizational members, the broader public and elites, and between the public themselves.

With the introduction of newer technologies such as digital smartphones and other internet enabled gadgets, individuals in different spheres of life, including political organizations and all political actors enjoy even more communication freedom and other opportunities. The features and structural opportunities inherent in such ICTs platforms according to Unwin (2012) are thus:

- (i) The increasing freedom that mobile technologies offer for people to communicate from any part of the world and at any time, or what might be called “space-time liberty”.
- (ii) A change in the balance of distributional power, away from the top-down dissemination of information by media corporations that were often state owned, to the co-creation of information, and more recently the widespread sharing of ideas, news and information between peers, what might be called “sharing liberty”.
- (iii) A dramatic reduction in the cost of information creation and communication, making it much more accessible to poorer people, witnessed through the dramatic explosion and take-up of miniaturized digital technologies such as mobile phones and cameras – what might be termed “access liberty”.

#### *Political Communication before the Emergence of New Information Technologies*

Before the inception of the new media, political activities thrived in the conventional media. Olajide (2002) cited in Onwukwe and Okeugo (2011) noted that prior to this period of the ICTs, political rallies, personal contacts and speeches were popularly used for mobilizing electorates, support on political issues, and that was greatly propelled by the mass media force. Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013) noted that:

The older or conventional media: radio, television, newspapers, magazines, etc., ruled the world, and had directly or indirectly blocked popular participation in the electoral process. This is because there has always been scarcity of space and airtime given by the conventional media to the citizens to have their say in politics, governance and in the electoral process (p.30).

At that time, individuals lacked an easily accessible platform for political participation, thus, it was risky and expensive. Individuals who nurtured interest for political activities, especially, such that would make their voice heard, were left to rely on what other political actors had to say through the mass media. The traditional media were faced with such criticisms as the absence of serious debate which could make people to learn the substance of issues and policies proposals as well as related arguments, and that this disallows citizens from participating actively in political discourse (Abubakar, 2011). The emergence of the new communication technologies has given political communication a new face; a face where everyone is a political spectator cum analyst, communicator and journalist.

#### *Technological Determinism Theory*

Technological determinism theory is always linked with McLuhan (1964) who posits that “the medium is the message”. It is all about the belief that technological development determines social and cultural change: family life, the work place, schools, health care, friendships, religion, and of course, politics. It explains also, that the dominant media determine people’s ratio of the senses; how they experience the world. Simply put, the modes of communication shape human existence. In summary, “The concept of technological determinism denotes the approach promoting the thesis that the use of educational technology is influenced both by the user and surroundings, but also, above all, by the technology itself” Hauer (2017, p. 1).

Some critics claim that the postulations of this theory were not entirely new with the claim that McLuhan failed to acknowledge previous scholars of social and cultural change; and also, that the assertion “the medium is the message” sounds rather ambiguous (DeFleur, 2010; Talabi, 2017). However, in his explanation of the assertion, McLuhan (1982) posits that societies have always been shaped more by nature of the media with which people communicate than by the content of the communication. This statement could be used to understand the reason why most people surf the net or join the social networks.

Many people join internet based activities mainly because they do not want to be left out in such prevailing exercise. As they surf the net they join some social networks and consequently, participate in political debates and other political related activities. In other words, the rise of the new communication technologies has made politics a participatory exercise.

#### *Political Communication Now: The Sociotechnical Change*

The revolution of the new communication technologies has changed the pattern of political communication. In the past decade, political communication began making the transition into the internet and specifically, the social media (Hanson, Handakis, Cunningham, Sharma & Ponder, 2010). One of the most important changes to the

political communication process has occurred through the rise of the Internet, particularly in post-industrial societies that are at the forefront of the information society such as the United States, Australia and Sweden (Norris, 2004).

Ward (2001) argued that political organizations utilize the new ICTs to improve on their normal activities and there has been no entire change from what they used to do or what used to be in political communication. According to him, the first and most common organizational response toward the technology will be one of “supplementation”, whereby the new media are viewed primarily as a means to improve existing practice, although some experimentation and innovation may occur.

Empirical studies of party and pressure group activity online have revealed some number of supplemental uses for new ICTs (Gibson and Ward, 2000):

- **As an administrative tool for storing or providing information.** Web sites or intranets can be used as libraries or archives to provide members and citizens with information. This can help organizations to save both financial and administrative resources through directing requests for information to their web-sites. Equally, the technology can be used to link different parts of an organization more effectively e.g. local branches or groups to organizational headquarters, this can speed the flow of information around the organization and web-sites can also act as “one stop shops” for the public by providing links to all the constituent parts of an organization.
- **As a political marketing or campaign tool** – New ICTs can be used for variety of campaigning or marketing purposes (Martin and Geiger, 1999). Many studies have noted the tendency of political organizations to use the sites for advertising and propaganda and some have likened sites to 6 electronic billboards (Roper, 1999). Furthermore, database technology is being utilized by both parties and pressure groups. For parties, it aids the canvassing and targeting of voters in marginal constituencies. Similarly, for large pressure groups data can be kept on members, sympathizers and lapsers for direct mail marketing and fund raising activities.
- **As a participatory and mobilization tool** – More interestingly perhaps some organizations will make greater use of the technology for securing and maintaining members’ interest and loyalty (Lofgren and Smith, 2002). Uses will tend to be for formal subscription-based party run intra-nets for members or electronic conferencing. Thus, although communication will be interactive, existing norms will mean that it will follow a clear two-way format that is structured from the top. Thus, despite the fact that members may gain more input, the internal

hierarchy will be maintained and even strengthened perhaps. Some would argue the new system promotes more discussion but it is questionable whether it promotes greater accountability (Gibson and Ward, 1999; Ward and Voerman, 2000).

One of the areas in which this active participation of the people has been enhanced, world over, is in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) platforms. Kuhus (2011) in his paper “Life in the Age of Self-Assembling message” cited in Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013) observes that:

The value of the communication experience has undergone a sea-change; from the need to share it, to the need to share in it. Technology and social media in particular have brought power back to the people; with such technologies, established authorities are now undermined and users are now the experts (p.31).

This implies that people can now consume media as wanted and needed rather than allowing media producers to schedule consumption time and content. A person can now communicate to anywhere from any place at any time. Again, using social media is less expensive than the outrageous political advertisements on the older media. The new media is flexible, accessible and affordable. They promote democratization of media, alter the meaning of geographic distance, and allow for increase in the volume and speed of communication. They are portable due to the mobile nature; they are interactive and open to all.

Politics has indeed greatly evolved in recent decade with the advent of the new technologies. With it, information sharing has greatly improved, allowing citizens to discuss ideas, post news, ask questions and share links. The platform gave voice to many Nigerian politicians and electorates alike to make their voice heard in the electoral process.

*The Use of Modern Communication Technologies in Nigerian Politics: The 2011 and 2015 General Elections Experience.*

The growing radius of new media can be seen in the developed as well as developing countries (Riaz, 2012). Indeed, information and communication technology (ICT) is rapidly developing in the third world countries like Nigeria despite the glaring infrastructural constraints. Nigeria experimented the use of this technology for political discourse during the 2011 general elections. Udejinta (2011) observed that one remarkable thing about the 2011 general elections was the adoption of social media especially the Facebook by the politicians, the political parties and the electorates as a platform for political participation.

Nigeria had her first real test of social media use for political purpose in 2011 general elections (Nnanyelugo & Nwafor, 2013; Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012). The new media technology played an unprecedented role in the April 2011 Nigerian General Elections. Nigerian politicians actively utilized social media for their campaigns. They sent

bulk texts and voice messages in unprecedented numbers. They made massive use of Facebook and other social media platforms to win support and canvass for votes. This entry was particularly noticed when the then president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan used his Facebook account to garner country-wide support. According to Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013), President Jonathan declared his intention to run for presidency on Facebook and subsequently, became the second most “liked” head of state in the world after US president Barack Obama. Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe (2011) cited in Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013) explicitly explained:

Jonathan had on Wednesday, September 15, 2010 informed his 217,000 fans on the world’s most popular networking platform (facebook) of his intent; 24 hours later, 4,000 more fans joined his page, and by the day of the election, on 16 April 2011, he had over half a million followers. His closest rivals, Alhaji Mohammed Buhari of the CPC, Nuhu Ribadu of the ACN and Alhaji Shakarau of the ANPP were also among those that made heavy presence on Facebook and other social media platforms. In addition to the approximately 3 million registered Nigerians on Facebook and 60,000 on Twitter, almost every institution involved in Nigeria’s elections conducted an aggressive social networking outreach, including the Independent National Electoral

Commission (INEC), political parties, candidates, media houses, civil society groups and even the police (p.30).

Indeed, political actors realized the enormous power of ICTs in general, and the internet in particular, optimizing the platforms to advance their electoral fortunes (Ikhariale, 2015). The deployment of platforms of ICTs in general, and the social media in particular, gave a new lease of life to Nigeria’s electoral process in 2011 and 2015. The INEC, political parties, candidates and media all made the most of technology in carrying out their activities (Agbata Jnr, 2015). However, the level at which ICT platforms were used in the 2015 elections was unprecedented in the country’s electioneering history. Short documentaries and animations on YouTube, mini-online conferences, the use of Twitter hashtags, and sponsored posts on political and lifestyle blogs expanded the online space (Owen and Usman, 2015). It is worthy to note that the use of new communications technologies during election periods is not restricted to announcing and monitoring election results but also serve specific interests on political stakeholders before, during and after the elections (Dunu, 2018). The table below shows the ICTs platforms of some political parties and their presidential candidates during the 2015 presidential elections. This of course has become the easiest way to reach electorates that are internet savvy.

**Table 1:** Some Political Parties, Candidates and ICTs Platforms during the 2015 Presidential Election

PARTY NAME	CANDIDATE	Facebook	Twitter	Candidate Website	Official Party Website
		Party and/or Candidate			
Action Alliance	Tunde Anifowose-Kelani	-	-	-	www.actionallianceng.org
Alliance For Democracy	Rafiu Salau	-	@rafukachang	-	-
All Progressives Congress	Muhammadu Buhari	mbuhari.ng	-	-	www.apc.com.ng
Kowa Party	Comfort O. Sonaiya	facebook.com/pages/KOWA-Party/138981326121350?fbf=ts	@oluremisonaiya	remisonaiya.com	www.kowaparty.net
National Conscience Party	Martin Onovo	-	@OnovoNCP2015	-	-
Peoples Democratic Party	Goodluck E. Jonathan	facebook.com/pages/Official-Peoples-Democratic-Party-PDP-Nigeria	@PdpNigeria	forwardnigeria.ng	www.peoplesdemocraticparty.com.ng
United Democratic Party	Godson M. O. Okoye	http://udp.ng/	-	-	-
United Progressive Party	Chekwas Okorie	facebook.com/UnitedProgressiveParty	@chekwas_okorie	Chekwasokorieforpresident.org	http://unitedprogressiveparty.org/

**Source:** Odeyemi and Mosunmola (2015)

The advantage of using the Internet, websites, Twitter and Facebook during elections, as noted by OpCit Research (2013), is that as well as sending information to potential voters, politicians become part of the mediated lives of those voters, proactively arriving in their Twitter feeds and Facebook news streams without their needing to actively seek them out; thus enabling a much human persona to emerge and

build reputation, fostering a much more interactive relationship. These platforms allow candidates to keep the content, distribution and timing of their messages; and most importantly, provide a way for them to monitor what is happening in the public sphere during an election campaign (Sunday, 2015). The electorates also utilize the social media to share information relating to elections, involve in political

campaigns especially for their candidate of choice and also improve the efficacy of election observation by providing situations in their various polling units and policing the available online results.

#### *New Media Technologies and Democratic Participation in Nigeria*

The revolutions in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly, the inception of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and YouTube, has enhanced the quality of governance and deepened the democratic process over the years by impacting positively on participation of citizens in public affairs; in relation to plurality of voices, activism, electoral activities and legitimacy of government policies. These ICTs platforms reinforce civil society by aiding freedom of expression and enhancing mobilization, thereby, strengthening the capacity of individuals. No wonder Diamond (2010) referred to them as “Liberation Technology” because they enable internet

citizens, known as “netizens” to report news, expose wrongdoings, express opinions, mobilize protest, monitor elections, scrutinize government, deepen participation, and expand the horizons of freedom. For example, there are several write-ups on different political matters that succeed or precede hashtag words or sentences on social media platforms such as #BringBackOurGirls, #FreeNnamdiKanu and #Change which are forms of political campaigns or public protests, created and shared by the internet savvy Nigerian public.

The continuous increase in the number of people that access the internet through various digital devices, increases the span of political participation and the dependence of the government, politicians and political parties on the new media. The table below shows increase in population of internet users from the year 2000 to 2015.

**Table 2:** 2014 Population and Internet Users Statistics (Second Quarter)

Territory	Population	Internet Users Dec. 31, 2000	Internet Users Latest Data	Internet Penetration %	Growth 2000-2015
World	7, 264, 623, 793	360, 985, 492	3, 079, 339, 857	42.4%	753.0%
Africa	1, 158, 353, 014	4, 514, 000	318, 633, 889	27.5%	6,958.2%
Nigeria	177, 155, 754	200, 000	70, 300, 000	39.7%	35, 050%

**Source:** International Communication Union

The Internet-based applications, particularly, the social media, go beyond users being able to retrieve information, but also to create and consume information themselves (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Sweetser & Lariscy, 2008). Social media allows user-generated contribution and participation at a great speed and scale, facilitating bottom-up engagement and breaking away significantly from the top-down news dissemination arrangement of older media on politics and other areas of life. (Sampedro, 2011) posits:

Online readers comment, distribute, and contest journalists’ accounts of political life. These dynamics suggest a new media environment in which convergence is only a starting point for reflection. The active public is no longer restricted to the contextual interpretation of political messages. Citizens now engage in building their own information, messages, and even campaigns of mobilization, based in and extended through digital devices (p.434).

Text messaging, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the Internet have given rise to a reservoir of political energy that posits a new relationship between the new media technologies, politics, and public life (Giroux, 2009). In Nigeria, for example, they have enhanced the active participation of the masses when it comes to decision making in the political arena. Nigerians used social media platforms to

organise protests such as “Enough is Enough” in April, 2010 to campaign for the then-Vice President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan to be made Acting President, a move that eventually led to the “doctrine of necessity” that got the National Assembly to name him the Acting President (Omojuwa, 2015).

As earlier stated, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan’s declaration of his intention to run for president on social media in 2011 is the hallmark of such practices by political parties and aspirants in Nigeria. However, his administration suffered a widespread of negative comments by the electorates which was engineered by the same platform. The strongest opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC) simply took advantage of the anger vented out on Jonathan’s administration by the masses on social media and it worked out in their favour in 2015 (Olorunsola, 2015 cited in Sunday, 2015). In line with the foregoing, Omojuwa (2015) argued that elections may not be won on ICTs platforms but perceptions are shaped there and more often than not, these perceptions even influence the so-called “legacy media”.

#### *Political Communication in the Digital Age: Challenges*

The new communication technologies have created lots of platforms that are characterized by high level of interaction of the major components of political communication (political organizations, the media or journalists and the people). Participation in political matters

by the citizens is at its peak but every innovation comes with its challenges.

The use of new communication technologies for social practices and political purposes can lead to or support both positive and negative political cultures. This is because these ICT platforms (the social media) that make political participation easier are known as the “uncensored media” where anything is easily accepted. According to Donsbach and Brade (2011) the worry in online political communication include: randomization or the unpredictable character of communication effects in the new media environment, fragmentation that might increase the ideological bias of sources and the selectivity of users and ultimately, the coexistence of a large proportion of high quality news next to the nonprofessional inputs of audiences. Dunu (2018) cited cases of the use of fake names and aliases by some groups in writing several posts that are most of the times filled with unverified information which are reproduced and rebroadcasted by online surfers during the 2015 general elections and 2017 gubernatorial elections in Anambra State. The internet enables publication of massive user-generated contents (Granados, 2016). These contents are uncensored, giving room for rumours and so many unprofessional contents.

### III. CONCLUSION

Participation of citizens in political issues, freedom of expression and the right of the citizens to vote in candidates who serve as representatives are the characteristics of a democratic country. The new communication technologies have boosted the democratic participation by creating different platforms where the government, political organizations and the people can share the beauty of democracy and the freedom therein. This explains the new paradigm which is fast becoming the dominant paradigm of political communication. However, the traditional media is still largely utilized as political organizations pay huge sums of money for political advertisements but with the emergence of the internet, there is a broader horizon that compliments the political efforts and several communication strategies used to get to the citizens. Politicians and political parties are now active on social media; they also have websites accessible through any digital device connected to the internet. Political communication has become more participatory and effective because the ICT platforms are filled with user generated contents which includes news, views, opinions, suggestions, complaints and/or satisfaction as regards political processes in the country.

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