

Miscellaneous**Social Media and Electioneering: The Case of the United States 2016 Presidential Election****Marylin Chijioke Ekwueme¹, Sheriff Folarin²**

Abstract: The 21st century has witnessed diverse technological advancement, part of which is the introduction of social media, which has permeated almost all areas of human endeavour, including politics. The 2016 American presidential elections in particular have become one of the most divisive trajectories because the social media became, in the hands of the two main candidates, Hillary and Trump, an effective tool of spreading hate, mischief and misinformation. Generally, politicians have swerved from the use of traditional media (broadcast and print) to the use of social media to carry out their political ambition. This paper examines the role of social media in the awareness, participation, and mobilizing electorates during the 2016 presidential election. The method of analysis is descriptive and the data are drawn from secondary literature. One of the major challenges of electioneering in the 21st century is that, due to the faceless nature of the internet, social media spreads propaganda, false information, and hate speeches that could defame the image of an electoral candidate.. Findings show that the social media played a major role in mobilizing people, creating awareness, as well as participation and circulation of information about candidates. It therefore recommends, that regulatory methods on what should and should not be posted on social media should be put in place by the governing bodies of various social media platforms. This way, campaigns that use and encourage hate speeches or instill violence will not be posted or published.

Keywords: democracy; globalization; hate speech

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1. Introduction

With the introduction of globalization, the world became a “global village” as proposed by Marshall McLuhan. The introduction of globalization came with diverse technological advancements. Edwards, et al (2013: 256) said “that decades before the CNN or Internet, McLuhan predicted a future where people would communicate via electronic media in a global village.”

Social media is a product of globalization as it is born out of various technological advancements. Aduloju (2016:30) said, “Social media is one of the driving forces of globalization and has validated the statement that the world is a global village.” This is because the social media breaks the proximity barrier as individuals can communicate, interact, and even do business via social media regardless of where they may be at the time. The use of social media has gone beyond connecting with friend and family, entertaining, or mere socializing. It has and is being used as a tool to disseminate information that has in turn led to political changes in the world. According to Ajayi & Adesote (2015), the emergence of the new social media is a phenomenon that has transformed the interaction, communication and sharing of information between people across the world. Social media have influenced this generation such that some individuals cannot do without going online in a whole day and so for such persons, one can say they are greatly taught, informed, and influenced by social media.

Politicians on the other hand have diverted from the use of the old media such as the print and the electronic media, to the use of the new media during electioneering to actualize their political goals. Today, politicians have embraced the 21st century technology, which is the social media in this context to effectively carry out their campaign aspiration. This was clearly depicted by the Obama campaign in 2008, as the social media was a major tool in his campaign. “During the 2008 presidential campaign of the then Senator Barack Obama, social media sites and content (such as YouTube videos, Facebook Fan Pages, Twitter accounts and the like) were used to reach out to constituents and potential voters with an unprecedented success rate” (Carpenter, 2009 as cited in Mergel 2013:9) Political candidates have used social media in the 21st century as a tool not just for political awareness of the electorates, but also for political mobilization, participation and to checkmate the their leaders. It is argued that,

Of recent, the social media have been playing a leading role in mobilising support for or against unpopular leadership. Recent happenings in the Arab Countries especially in Egypt, Lybia, Tunisia have clearly demonstrated the effects of the social media on political mobilization of the youths to effectively checkmate leaders thus leading to their enthronement or dethronement. It is also on record that, the recent London riots that took the ancient city by storm were hinged on the power of social media. (Titus- Fannie, Akpan, & Solomon, 2013:32)

This therefore denotes that one cannot push aside the impact the social media commands in electioneering all over the world. Notwithstanding the fact that the social media is just on cyberspace, it has affected and influenced the electioneering and governing process all over the world with the United States of America at the forefront. However, regardless of the several benefits derived from technological changes that had manifested in the society and the world at large, the social media though intended for good could most times be misused. In the case of electioneering, electoral candidates, their supporters as well as their political party, could use the social media to spread fake news, hate speeches as well as wrong information about its opponent with the aim of destroying the candidate imagine before the electorates as a good number of electorates are signed up to various social media platforms. According to Olabamiji (2014:48) “the website, blogs, and social media platforms are used strategically to narrate politicians’ curriculum vitae, present political ideology list achievements, enumerate their agenda, canvass for votes, and at times disparage opposition.”

This paper therefore examines the role of social media in the 2016 United States Presidential election electioneering process.

2. Social Media Concept and Tool

The social media has become an inseparable part of modern human existence. Its user base is more than the populace of many nations. The social media seems to provide solutions to just almost every need ranging from sharing of photos, videos, news, product sales, connecting with old friends, dating, updated amongst others.

Many scholars have defined and conceptualized social media in diverse ways but for the purpose of this article, the following authors were cited.

Papaslomou & Melanthiou (2012) said, “Social media are often characterized as sites where participants can produce, critique, control, and interact with online content. They are also an extension of communications” (as cited in Lewis 2013:7). For Nnanyelugo & Nwafor (2013), social media are “interactive, web-based media. They belong to the new genre of media that focus on social networking, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information, as well as publish their own views on the internet.” Storck (2011:11) defines the social media as “online tools and utilities that allow communication of information online; participation and collaboration. Furthermore, social media tools are websites that interact with the users, while giving them information.” While Edwards, *et al* (2013:272), define social media as “web-based services that allow individuals to create a public profile and maintain and view a list of users who share common interest”

From the diverse definitions above, the social media can be understood a means of direct online communication and that it has differed from the traditional media in that, the right to content creation is given to the end users and consumers. In essence, social media does not just make individuals, content consumers, but it also make individuals content producers. The various social media platforms enable individuals to publish their thoughts, and actions without interference. In recent times, one does not rely solely on the traditional media for information. This is because regardless of what an issue may be, one is able to make it known to the public either through Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, YouTube and it goes viral like wild fire.

3. Electioneering

Electioneering comprises of campaigning, dissemination of information about a candidate, blogging for a candidate, editorializing, persuading voters in favour of a candidate, making of phone calls, and even raising of funds to achieve or actualize favorable election. As cited in Olabamiji (2014:47) electioneering is;

The process of asking for peoples votes prior an election. It involves managing political parties, electoral umpires, the electorates, and the candidates. It is a process of communicating, responding, and determining political future of states. Political Campaign forms part of the electioneering process. It is an

opportunity for candidates to sell themselves to the electorate using both interpersonal and mediated communication systems. Electoral campaigns offer platforms for political policy articulation and debates that enable the electorate to decide (it is hoped) objective information, which economic and political policies they want the government to adopt (Slann, 1998:182).

Electioneering therefore deals with the entirety of activities created to solicit or influence the anticipated preference of the electorates. They are the pre-election activities.

4. Democracy, Social Media, and Democratic Government

Over the years, democracy has been recognized and acknowledged as the best and ideal form of government and so it has been adopted by various countries. A number of scholars have defined democracy in line with their fields, however the most accepted definition of democracy is the one credited to Abraham Lincoln that defines democracy as “the government of the people, by the people and for the people.” By this, the people make up the government, elected the government who in turn, represent the people. This way the people actively participate in the government. Schumpeter (1942) gives a minimalist definition when he describes democracy as a “method by which decision-making is transferred to individuals who have gained power in a competitive struggle for the votes of the citizens.”

Dahl (1989) however gives a more complete explanation that defines three vital conditions for democracy to function. According to him, high level of civil liberties, political pluralism that is extensive competition of contestants including individuals, groups and the third which has to do with political participation that provides the choice for the electorate to select in free and fair elections are very essential for democracy (cited in Egbe, 2014).

Democracy is a polity that respects the rule of majority, but protects at the same time, the fundamental human rights of individuals and minority groups (Udebunu, 2007). According to Nor (2007), democracy purposely or deliberately aims at achieving goals and objectives which among others include the advancement of freedom, impartiality and independence to all citizens to partake in government without restrictions and to this end sustain their human self-respect. Nwekeaku (2014: 27), “democracy is the government put in place by the people, who upholds the spirit of social contract between the state and the people, ensures equitable

distribution of the state resources and equal opportunity for all its citizens, and whose operations are based on the rule of law.”

Democracy has been seen as the most reliable form of government as it encourages freedom of speech and does not violate human rights. It is also a form of government in which the right to make political decisions is exercised directly by the whole body of citizens, acting under procedures of majority rule. According to Obiwulu (2007), in a democratic government, people in order to ensure proper government and adequate representation organize themselves and choose how they are to be represented. With the introduction of democratic system of government, leaders are elected into various offices unlike in the military regime where leaders come into office via coup.

According to Udebunu (2007), democracy is preferred to all other polities because in it is the affirmation of human rights and natural law. These are the rights of man as man, rights that accrue to him necessarily and universally and are not bound by space and time. For Enemu (1999), democracy is regarded as the government organized according to the principles of popular participation in the choice of leaders, guarantee of individual liberties, and governance according to the rule of law. Adding to this, Nwekeaku (2014) is of the opinion that both democracy and the rule of law are different faces of a coin because democracy provides a favorable and encouraging environment for the rule of law to properly function and the rule of law on the other hand strengthens democracy.

This therefore supports the essence and practices of the various social media platforms in the sense that the people or masses have the right to air or voice their opinions on any matter including politics without any restrictions.

According to the Speaker of Nigeria House of Representatives, Hon. Adiminu Tambuwal, MHR, with the fast evolving of information communication technologies, all aspects of life are influence one way or the other, nevertheless, no area is as affected as the world of politics as authoritarian governance have been substituted by democratic government (Heibert, 2012).

He further added that social media counters the mode of operation of the traditional media. This is because it enables individuals to air their views on governments without restrictions. Their effortless access and wide coverage facilitates extensive political participation political participation thus encouraging rapid

development in one region or part of the world, which consequently affects other areas.

Africa as a continent has seen a growing use of social media to encourage freedom of speech, mobilization, political dialogue, and as a political mechanism for putting their leaders in check. Facebook is the most visited website. The influence of social media to assemble or mobilize individuals and generate governmental pressure was first observed amid the Arab Spring in 2011. Social media was also used in October 2014 in Burkina Faso as a tool to keep President Blaise Compaoré from changing the constitution which would have enabled him to pursue for another term making him 27 years in office (Nolle, 2016).

However, some countries that practice flagged “democratic governance” have seen the introduction of social media as a threat in their political system and political communication. This is because the social media gives their citizens the voice to rise against an authoritarian or insubordinate government. In some countries, their government restrict the law on freedom of speech with the excuse that it will bridge “national security.” According to Noelle (2016) several nations have extremely restraining media laws which permit the infringement of press freedom and dialogue. Their government justify this saying that the national security will be vulnerable if information is free and open to everyone.

Noelle (2016) outlines some African countries whose government suspended or restricted social media services especially during elections all for political reasons;

- It is in record that during election periods, some African countries tend to put laws restraining media freedom for political reasons. Egypt was the first nation to cut off from the web and social media in 2011 just for political reasons. The media communications suppliers in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) were asked by the legislature to suspend the web as well as SMS organizations in January 2015. This continued for some days while the citizens kicked against President Joseph Kabila and elections was postponed.
- In Congo-Brazzaville (Republic of Congo) also, when it was towards the election period, there was 48 hours of no internet connection, phone, and SMS services. President Denis Sassou Nguesso who has been president since 1979 was at the end of the day chosen as president again. In April 2015, Burundi’s President Pierre Nkurunziza announced he was going to run for a third term that was generally viewed as illegal and undemocratic. While the masses protested against

Nkurunzizza, social media services was disrupted for a few days in the country after which, Pierre Nkurunzizza stifled the demonstration and finally emerged the winner of the election.

- Countries like Central African Republic, Egypt, Kenya, and Niger likewise experienced brief blackouts of social media in the midst of elections. The governing body of Uganda also requested broadcast communications suppliers to suspend their administrations twice in 2016: in February the election day and in May amid the introduction of President Yoweri Museveni for his fifth presidential term. Even Ghana the supposed model of democratic government reported that it would suspend services of social media amid the November 2016 elections.

Individuals all over the world today, through the internet have seen and known how democracy works in other countries and so they in turn desire same in their country. Therefore, when their government go contrary they tend to use the available social media platforms to protest against such government so as to ensure a democratic government.

5. Theoretical Discourse

The uses and gratification theory is the core theory for this work. It was propounded by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1974. The theory assumes that the result of media messages is what matters and of great importance. Anaeto, Onabanjo, & Osifeso (2008: 71) believe this theory is “concerned with what people do with media instead of what media do to people.”

Furthermore, Baran (2004: 428) said the uses and gratification theory is of the view that, “the media do not do things to people; rather, people do things with the media.” This therefore posits that there is a limit to the influence of the media on people as the media is restricted to what people allow it to be. Adeyanju & Haruna (2011) also notes that “the main thrust of the theory is that the audience have certain needs which make them to be selectively exposed to, attend to, and retain media messages because of the perceived gratifications derivable from such messages” (cited in Nnanyelugo & Nwafor, 2013: 37).

For West & Tuner (2004:393), “the theory holds that people actively seek out specific media and specific content to generate specific gratification or results.”

The theory views individuals as active because they are able to examine and evaluate the media messages and interpret it in a way that it meets their needs.

Applying this theory to this work, the social media platforms during the United States 2016 campaigns, were used to spread information on frequently visited social media platforms with the aim of influencing the decision of the electorates. However, this theory is of the view that the electorates are the ones that influence the media message as they interpret these messages as they deem fit. The effects of the messages posted on social media by the electoral candidates are mainly determined by the electorates themselves not the platform or the message. This theory is suitable for this paper because it points out the power the audience over the media and their choice on how to use the media messages. The electorates choose what platform to subscribe to and what message to accept or reject also, the electoral candidates choose what platform to send their messages through, and they choose the content of the message they are sending across.

6. History of Elections and Electioneering in the United States of America

Initially in America's History, presidential candidates were not actively involved in the campaign for presidency as it was considered undignified (Benoit, 2009). During American's first Century of her existence, presidential candidates would act as though the candidacy was forced on them. They would pretend to be very reluctant for the position. Unlike today where presidential candidates engage actively and publicly in campaigns, the presidential candidates of the first century would refrain from open campaigning, or doing, or saying anything that would imply that they are interested in becoming president. This non-committal attitude of candidates reflected in the campaigns as they were nothing to write home about since the candidates did not take responsibility in the first place and they were also not officially involved in the campaign. Hence, the political parties believed they could engage in different kinds of libel that no one would react (Vitale, 2016).

During the pre-modern campaign era, organisation of party was majorly locally oriented, involving politicians, as well as party workers, and face-to-face contact with citizens via town hall campaigning, canvassing, and meetings with branch party. The base was a liberal organizational network of party volunteers spread in local areas. Members volunteered for some labour in mass- branch party

organisation, they also helped the local candidate, advised by the electorate party agent. The old campaigns was heavily dependent on the biased press, regarding them as the main source of arbitrated information, either owned and subsidized directly by the party or indirectly owned and managed however given considerate partisan spin via editorial columns and political observation (Norris, 2004).

In recent times, not only have newspaper, and radio campaigns been supplemented by Television campaigns, currently the use of the new platform (Social media) for campaign is even predominate that these old medium.

7. The Social Media and the 2016 United States Presidential Elections

Drama in the 2016 United States presidential election was much anticipated almost all over the world. This was because of the massive use of social media platforms by the presidential candidates to reach the electorates. The massive use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Blogs, and YouTube by the presidential candidates was to announce, strengthen their candidacy and demean the other (Hwang, 2016).

Hwang (2016: 32) pointed out that:

The digital announcement of the 2016 presidential candidates illustrate the considerable influence social media will have on the current electoral cycle. Ben Carson launched a social media campaign on Facebook prior to his formal announcement, letting his online followers know the details of his live announcement: "I wanted to pass along some good news regarding my announcement Monday morning in Detroit. The event will be broadcast on my website," Carson wrote on Facebook. In more obvious case, the candidates have been used social media to announce their presidential bids. U.S Senator Ted Cruz, the first major presidential candidate to officially announce a presidential campaign in 2016, announced his bid on Twitter, tweeting a video accompanied with the caption: "I'm running for President and I hope to earn your support!" Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton officially launched her campaign for president with a two minute video shared on YouTube and her campaign website, with a following Twitter announcement that was seen three million times within an hour

of being posted. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush partnered with Snapchat for his live announcement in Miami to document his campaign kick-off.

Preparations for the 2016 US presidential election started from the beginning of 2015 until November 2016 when the election eventually held.

A Pew Research Center study cited that more Americans have taken up various social media communication to interact with their candidate and get to know more about them. This therefore implies that campaigns are not only limited to active members on Facebook and Twitter, but also platforms such as Reedit live chats and Snapchats just to make it more personal (Greenwood, Perrin & Duggan, 2016).

However, it should be pointed out that social media platforms played a major role in the way candidates communicate with the electorates. Further analysis from the Pew Research Study center showed that 44% of American adults learned about the 2016 presidential election in January 2016 from social media outlets more than the local and national print newspapers. In addition, 24% of the U.S voters as of July 2016, said regarding news and information, they have focused more on the social media post of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump while 15% turn to the websites or email of either of the candidates.

Duggan & Smith (2016) cited an analysis conducted for three weeks by the Pew Research Study center on the Facebook and Twitter accounts of Hillary Clinton, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders and how they used of the social media for campaign purpose. 714 tweets and 389 Facebook post made by the candidates between May11 and May 31 2016 were under studied by the Pew Research Study center and findings showed that all three candidates post at same rate however, their focus and the attention given to the post by the masses, differ. Clinton and Sanders used mostly links to highlight official campaign communications whereas Trump links constantly to the news media. Trump also employed the techniques of retweeting ordinary people regularly even though it was rare, than Clinton or Sander. Clinton's use of videos were minimal as compared to that of Trump whereas Sanders made use of videos more on Facebook than he did on Twitter. Finally, on both Facebook and Twitter, Trump and Clinton concentrated on each other whereas Sanders was rarely mentioned.

According to further Pew Research Study center, during the 2016 United States presidential campaign, many social media users, viewed that the social media platforms were used as an avenue for exceptionally angry and disrespectful

discussion of political debates. Statistics show that 40% of users concur unequivocally with the thought that social media are spots where individuals say things while talking about governmental issues that they could never say face to face (an extra 44% feel that this portrays social media to some degree well). Then, generally, 50% of clients feel the political discussions they see via social media are angrier (49%), less deferential (53%) and less sociable (49%) than those in different aspects of life (cited in Duggan & Smith, 2016).

Regardless of these aggravations, social media users that have high level of political engagement find it interesting to participate during talks, debates, post and make comments on post that relate to political issues on social media to them this is considered as a good side as it enable interactions and participation (Duggan & Smith, 2016). This therefore indicates that the social media played a role at ensuring that the United States electorates participated during the 2016 presidential election electioneering process as they were engaged in one way or the other.

With millions of followers on social media platforms, the 2016 candidates communicated to a much larger audience than did Obama in 2008, when he had just a hundred thousand followers. This invariably means that more people than in the later elections heard the messages in the prior elections. It has also resulted in more constant and consistent activity on these platforms, especially on Twitter.

According to Vitale (2016), Twitter still played a major role in the 2016 presidential election. An analysis of the use of Twitter in the 2016 presidential election show that the use of twitter by presidential candidates over the years has changed. Whereas Obama and Romney's focused on policy updates and included links to main websites, those of Trump and Hilary used Twitter as a medium of talking to each other and they also took advantage of these social media platforms to capitalize on personal attacks. On August 25, 2016 Donald trump via his twitter handle @realDonaldTrump twitted; "Hillary Clinton is using race-baiting to try to get African-American voters- but they know she is all talk and NO ACTION!"

Since Twitter's top users are increasingly active on the site, it has become a place for many people to vocalize discontent. The use of hash tags (#) to start conversations, have placed candidates in awkward positions. Social media also propagated the use to pictures in hate speeches and caricature of opponents. All these point to the fact that social media platforms for electioneering helped to make electorates aware of candidates and participate in the electioneering.

8. Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper encapsulated the vital role social media played during the electioneering process of the 2016 United States presidential election. This is because the online presence of the electorates is increasing on daily bases due to the evolving nature of information communication technology. Electorates do not solely rely on the traditional media for information because with the advent of social media that is accessible on smart phones, one could stay in his or her comfort one and still get vital information about a candidate and his or her thought at the particular time. With this new development, many electoral candidates in the world and in this case in United States took advantage of this platform to make voters aware of them, mobilize them and also participate in the process.

Furthermore, findings from this paper also show that electoral candidates bastardised the use of social media by making use of hate speeches, and personal attacks.

Therefore, this paper recommends some level of decorum, respect and well as professionalism for electoral candidates using social media platforms to perpetuate their course. Electoral candidate should not abuse the social media via the statements and information that is posted on various social media platform. Electoral candidates should make less use of hate speeches and they should avoid perpetuating false information news. The 2016 United States election campaign was a rather nasty one as electoral candidates especially Donald Trump, made use hate speeches that were very provocative and could incite violence if pre-cautions are not adhered to or applied.

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