

## *Social Media as a Voice to the Voiceless: The Nigerian Experience*

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### **Abstract**

Social media as a communication tool has some advantages over the traditional media because of its ability to bridge the gap between the privileged and the less privileged. The study looks at how the social media was used to give voice to the voiceless especially in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria which led to a change in administration. The study focused specifically on how comments on some social media like WhatsApp and Twitter was used in the campaign for change among the youths in Nigeria. Anchored on the Agenda setting theory and technological determinism theory the study adopted a Survey research method. Some youths from three tertiary institutions in Kogi State were used for the study .Findings revealed that over 95% of the Nigerian youths were sensitized for the election through social media; that it was actually through the postings on the social media that created awareness for them to desire for change. The study recommends amongst others that the human right activists, the media and the government should sensitize the people more on the need to use social media to express themselves, claim their rights, and expose the ills of the government and that of the society. The freedom to give and receive information is vital for the development of any nation consequently the use of social media should be viewed as a fundamental instrument for social change and development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria; Public Opinion; Social Change; Social Media; Youth.

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## **Introduction**

Social media have become part of the twenty – first century society. Virtually everything in the society today has been affected by social media. Businessmen and women use it to advertise their products, religious organizations use it to spread the gospel, and most frequently, politicians use it to sell their political ideas and achieve their political objectives. Social media has changed the way we view and interact with the world and it has given power to individuals and small groups.

The potential impact of social media in electoral campaign was evident in the 2008 United States (US) presidential election. President Barack Obama’s campaign included the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube. Others included podcasting and mobile messaging. The election, dubbed by many, as the ‘Facebook election’, saw nearly 70% of the vote among Americans aged 25 years and younger going to Obama.

During the 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria, social media was greatly used by different people irrespective of their social status. Politicians greatly used it to canvas for votes. Social media allows candidates to communicate directly with citizens, keeping control of the content, distribution and timing of their messages, as well as reducing their dependence on traditional intermediaries. It also provides a way for politicians to monitor what is happening in the public sphere during an election campaign (Omowole 2015).

Commenting further on the important of social media to politics, Omowole (2015) writes, “Nigerian politicians who are not integrating active social media campaign into their arsenal may miss the opportunity to connect with the 45 million internet users in Nigeria. Their social media campaign should include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn and Google Plus, among others”.

Beyond the use of social media by politicians is the fact that most people who could not afford to pay to air their voices through the traditional media like radio, television, newspaper and magazine found solace in the social media. People freely use it to express their political opinion about political parties and their candidates. The instrument of social media unarguably became a voice to those whose comments would not have passed the criteria for judging news values by traditional media.

## **Objectives of the Study**

1. To discover what motivated the youth to participate more in the 2015 presidential election compared to the previous elections.
2. To discover which media was used more by the Nigerian youths during the 2015 presidential election.
3. To discover what informed the choice of one media and not the other.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Use of Social Media for Election**

Social media are internet based applications put together on the principles and technological fundamentals of Web 2.0.

Nwanton, Odoemalumn, Orji-Egwu, Nwankwo and Nweze (2013) define social media as those internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate contents, distribute and search for information online. Popular social media include Facebook , Twitter, LinkedIn, Whatsapp YouTube, Flickr, among others.

Social media have become veritable campaign tools in the hands of politicians globally. Social media have elicited different studies from different scholars especially as they regard political participation.

For example a meta study by Boulianne (2015) on “Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research,” analyzes 36 studies on the relationship between social media use and everything from civic engagement broadly speaking to tangible actions such as voting and protesting. Some focus on youth populations, others on social media use in selected countries. Within these 36 studies, there were 170 separate “coefficients” — different factors potentially correlated with social media use. Boulianne notes that the studies were all based on self-reported surveys, with the number of respondents ranging from 250 to more than 1,500. Twenty studies were conducted between 2008 and 2011, while eight were from 2012-2013. The study’s key findings include: Among all of the factors examined, 82% showed a positive relationship between social media use and some form of civic or political engagement or participation. Still, only half of the relationships found were statistically significant. The strongest effects could be seen in studies that randomly sampled youth populations. The correlation between social-media use and election-campaign participation “seems weak based on the set of studies analyzed,” while the relationship with civic engagement is generally stronger. Further, “Measuring participation as protest activities is more likely to produce a positive effect, but the coefficients are not more likely to be statistically significant compared to other measures of participation.” Also, within the area of protest activities, many different kinds of activities — marches, demonstrations, petitions and boycotts — are combined in research, making conclusions less valid. When studies do isolate and separate out these activities, these studies generally show that “social media plays a positive role in citizens’ participation.” Overall, the data cast doubt on whether social media use “causes” strong effects and is truly “transformative.” Because few studies employ an experimental design, where researchers could compare a treatment group with a control group, it is difficult to claim causality.

Social media have been greatly used for elections and studies have shown that this influences voting in some way. A study conducted by Pew Research Centre (2015) report that 66% of social media users (39% of American adults) have engaged in one of eight civic or political activities with social media, 38% of those who use social networking sites (SNS) or Twitter “like” or promote material related to politics or social issues that others have been posted, 35% have used social networking sites to encourage people to vote, 34% have used the tools to post their own thoughts or comments on political and social issues, 33% have used the tools to repost content related to political or social issues that was originally posted by someone else, 31% have used the tools to encourage other people to take action on a political or social issue, 28% have used the tools to post links to political stories or articles for others to read, 21% belong to a group on a social networking site that is involved in political or social issues, 20% have used the tools to follow elected officials and candidates for office. The problem with this study is that Pew did not give details on the methodology, the population and sample among others.

A study by Smyth and Best (2013) on “Tweet to Trust: Social Media and Elections in West Africa” is thus become relevant to this argument. The researcher conducted a set of 27 semi-structured interviews in Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria and Monrovia, Liberia. Data collection took place over a 2-week period in May/June of 2012. using qualitative

method of data analysis, the researchers focus on the general elections in Nigeria and Liberia in 2011. Participants suggested that social media help to overcome previous scarcity of information during the electoral process, leading to increased transparency and reduced tension. Furthermore, social media based monitoring shows encouraging signs of robustness. The choice of qualitative method of data analysis by the researchers made it difficult to describe the result statistically.

In Nigeria's 2015 presidential election, the use and effectiveness of social media for electoral campaign was clearly manifested. The main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) is probably the biggest beneficiary of the value social media bring to the table. Elections may not be won on social media but perceptions are shaped.

#### Social Media as the Voice for the Voiceless.

Social media have become the power of the masses. They are the instruments of the masses and the only media where the citizens can freely air their minds.

With little or no capital, the citizens can use the social media in communicating their ideas, feelings and even mobilize for mass action. A good example of the use of social media as the voice for the voiceless is the revolution in Egypt.

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution, was inspired by a similar revolution in nearby Tunisia, which saw the overthrowing of the long time Tunisian president.

Thousands took to the streets in Cairo, Alexandria and other cities in Egypt to protest poverty, unemployment, government corruption, and the autocratic rule of 30 year president Hosni Mubarak (Kanalley, 2011). The primary demands from protesters were the end of Hosni Mubarak's regime, the end of emergency law, and a call for freedom, justice, a responsive non military government, and management of Egypt's resources (Madrigal, 2011). The protests in Egypt were inspired by the successful revolution in neighbouring Tunisia, which saw the overthrow of dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The protests began after a 26-year-old fruit vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on ablaze to protest the injustices of life under Ben Ali. A Facebook page in his honour made him a national martyr and led to massive protests (Yaffa, 2011). Soon, Facebook played a continuing major role in the protests, as activists used the site to share videos and information when many other sites were blocked by the Tunisian government. The videos, pictures, and information about protests spread like wildfire, and Tunisia had several hundred thousand new Facebook users in a few days, with average time spent on the site doubling. (

Sheedy 2011). However, this was not without the government's notice, and online activists began to have run-ins with Ammar, the name Tunisians had given to the authorities that censor the Internet. Thousands of passwords were captured by the government using the country's Internet Service Providers to log information and delete profiles (Madrigal, 2011). In this case, Facebook took action. They routed all Tunisian requests for Facebook to an https server, which encrypts information so that it's not susceptible to the key logging strategy the Tunisian government was using. They also employed a system that required users to identify their friends in

photos in order to log back into their account (Madrigal, 2011). Neighbouring Egypt watched the YouTube videos, read the tweets, joined the Facebook groups, and watched as Ben Ali was overthrown. “The riveting images beamed into millions of Egyptian homes of the Tunisian uprising appear to have led to a shift in the public consciousness” (Murphy, 2011).

Prior to the 2015 presidential election, young Nigerians used to congregate on social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, 2go etc to express their anger against the government. They used the platforms to organize protests like “Enough Is Enough” in April of 2010 to campaign for the then-Vice President 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 Acting President. The force of Nigeria’s young people rose to a crescendo with the #OccupyNigeria movement in January of 2012. That anger has since been sustained and indeed spread to other young people who would ordinarily not be interested in politics. (Omojuwa, 2015) The scenario above gives insight into the power of social media as the voice to the voiceless.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

This study is anchored on two theories; **Agenda setting** and **technological determinism**.

#### **Agenda Setting Theory**

Agenda Setting theory holds that the media; most especially the news media, dictates what issues (agenda) to be considered most important by the society. The theory was proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972/1973. Asogwa & Esimokha (2015:97) remarks that the agenda-setting theory implies that the media predetermined the issues that are important because the level of attention given to an issue in the media determines the level of importance the public assigns to that issue. The theory is relevant to the study because through the instrument of social media, the citizens were able to set the political agenda during the 2015 general election in Nigeria.

#### **Technological Determinism theory**

Technological Determinism simply put, is the idea that technology has important effects on our lives. Asogwa & Esimoka (2015) says that technological determinism is the “idea that media technology shapes how we as individuals in a society think, feel, act and how our society operate as we move from one technological age to another”. The theory was propounded by McLuhan in 1962. Just as expressed by the theory; the new technology has determined the change in communication pattern in society among different people. The political agenda that was hitherto set by only politicians has changed as ordinary citizens now play a critical role in determining the political agenda. The political space has become more competitive and people are now more conscious of their right to communication and information more than ever before.

Though technological determinism as a theory has been widely criticized by scholars who opine that the relationship between technology and society cannot be reduced to a ‘cause and effect’ formula, the researcher finds this theory very relevant to this particular study because the social media use has made a landmark in the history of Nigerian democracy. It has furthered the cause for a more authentic democracy in a developing nation like Nigeria.

## Method

The Survey research design (questionnaire) was used for this study. There are seven tertiary institutions in Kogi State (Kogi State University, Anyigba ; Federal University, Lokoja; Kogi State Polytechnic, Lokoja; Kogi State College of Education, Ankpa; Federal Polytechnic, Idah; College of Education Technical, Okene and Salem University, Lokoja.) , we purposively decided to use three tertiary institutions ( 1 university, 1 polytechnic and 1 college of education) in Kogi State to represent others.

Thus the following: Kogi State University, Anyigba, Federal polytechnic, Idah and, College of Education, Okene. This criterion also meets the regional demarcation of Kogi State as a tertiary institution was picked from each of the three major zones.

**Table 1: List of Selected Institution**

Institutions	Population
Kogi State University, Anyigba	13, 583
Federal Polytechnic , Idah	6, 039
Federal College of Education, Okene	3,852
Total	23,474

Using the Fischer statistical formula we arrived at the sample size of 384.

The Fisher formula as cited in Ibrahim (2009), state thus:

$$n = z^2 pq / d^2$$

Where

n= desired sample size where the population under study is more than 10,000

z= standard normal deviation = 1.96

p= proportion of target population estimated to the practical characteristics from a previous similar study.

Where none exists, p= 50% or 0.5

$$q = 1 - p$$

d= degree of accuracy = 5% or 0-05

For this study therefore, the sample size is:

$$(1.96)^2 (0.5) 1 - (0.5) / (0.05)^2$$

$$1.96 \times 1.96 = 3.8416$$

$$3.8416 \times 0.5 \times 0.5 / 0.0025 = 384.16$$

$$n = 384.16 \text{ or } 384 \text{ approximately.}$$

This study employed a multiple stage sampling; at the first instance purposive sampling was used to select the three tertiary institutions used for the study. At the second stage the quota sampling technique was used to ensure equal distribution of the questionnaires among the three selected institutions as is evident in table 2 below.

**Table 2: Selected Institutions population and sample**

<b>Instituions</b>	<b>population</b>	<b>percentage</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
Kogi State University, Anyigba	13, 583	57.9%	222
Federal Polythecnic, Idah	6,039	25.8%	99
Federal College of Education, Okene	3,825	16.4%	63
Total	23,474	100	384

At the last stage the simple random sampling technique was used to determine the faculties/ departments / classes and the respondents selected for the study. We used only students that have access to Social media for the study; this was achieved by asking the students if they have access to social media before administering the questionnaire. Tables of frequency and simple percentages were used to analyze the data gathered.

### **Findings of the Study**

Three hundred and Eighty four questionnaires was administered in three selected institutions and amazingly 380(99%) questionnaires was returned and 4(1%) not returned.

On the demographic aspect, we discovered that all the respondents are between 16 and 30 years of age, it was equally discovered that the majority of the respondents are male with a total number of 222 while female is in minority with a total of 158 female.

Of course as earlier mentioned in the selection of respondents, all of them have access to social media.

**Table 3: Participation in the 2015 presidential Election**

<b>Did you participate in the 2015 presidential Election?</b>	Yes	No
Total	380	0

It can be deduced from the above that all the respondents participated in the 2015 presidential election.

**Table 4: Respondents distribution by how they participated in the 2015 presidential election.**

<b>How did you participate in the 2015 Presidential election</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage(%)</b>
<b>a. Sending and receiving messages through Twitter</b>	160	42
<b>b. Sending and receiving messages through WhatsApp</b>	200	53
<b>c. Sending and receiving messages through other social media</b>	20	5
<b>d. Sending and receiving messages through traditional media</b>	0	0
<b>e. Other Way, Specify</b>	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>100</b>

From the above data it is evident that 160(42%) of the respondents participated by sending and receiving messages via twitter; 200 (53%) participated by sending and receiving message via WhatsApp while 20(5%) participated using other social media network, none of them used the traditional media.

**Table 5: Reasons that motivated them to Participate**

<b>What motivated you to participate?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>a. High level of corruption in the country</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>3.4</b>
<b>b. The messages received by the social media spurred me</b>	<b>362</b>	<b>95.3</b>
<b>c. I am interested in politics</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>d. Desire for change of those in power</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>e. others, Specify ( Lack of job opportunities for the youth)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.3</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>100</b>

13(3.4%) were motivated due to the high level of corruption; 362(95.3%) were motivated by the messages received by the social media; 2(0.5%) were motivated because they are interested in politics; 2(0.5%) were motivated because of their desire for change of those in power and 1(0.3) was motivated due to lack of job opportunities for the youth.

**Table 6: Reason for using social media instead of traditional media**

<b>Why did you use the social media instead of other traditional media</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>a. It was cheaper and more accessible</b>	<b>202</b>	<b>53.2</b>
<b>b. The traditional media supported the government in power</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0.8</b>
<b>c. It is very difficult to access the traditional media</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3.2</b>
<b>d. The youth can be reached in the social media than the traditional media</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>40.2</b>
<b>e. The pattern in which the message was packaged is interesting</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2.6</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>100</b>

202 (53.2%) respondents used the social media instead of the traditional media because it is cheaper and more accessible; 3(0.8%) used the social media because the traditional media supported the government in power; 12(3.2%) used the social media because it is very difficult to access the traditional media; 153(40.2%) used it because the youth can be reached in the social media than the traditional media; 10(2.6%) used it because the pattern in which the message was packaged is interesting.



**Table 7: Respondents distribution by the type of social media network used**

<b>Which social media network did you use during the campaign?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>a. Twitter</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>44.2</b>
<b>b. Facebook</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>7.9</b>
<b>c. WhatsApp</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>d. 2go</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>e. Instangramm</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.3</b>
<b>f. Others</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1.1</b>
<b>g. Total</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>100</b>

168(44.2.) used Twitter, 30(7.9%) used facebook; 175(46%) used WhatsApp; 2(0.5%) used 2go; 1(0.3%) used Instangramm and 4(1.1%) used other social media networks.

**Table 8: Reason for the choice of Social network**

<b>What informed your choice of one Social network instead of the other?</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>a. More enticing messages and pictures in the site</b>	<b>152</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>b. More factual messages in the network site</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>42.1</b>
<b>c. More people in the network site</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>d. Accessibility of the network site</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>7.4</b>
<b>e. I just like the network Site</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0.5</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>380</b>	<b>100</b>

152(40%) used one social network instead of the other because it has more enticing messages and pictures; 160(42.1%) because it has more factual messages; 38(10%) because there are more people in the network site; 28(7.4%) because the network site is accessible and 2(0.5%) because they just like the network site.

### **Summary of findings**

From the data gathered it is evident that many Nigerian youths participated in the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria and that majority of them participated through sending and receiving messages via the social media. That many of them were motivated to participate due to the messages they received through the social media. All of them used the social media mostly Twitter and WhatsApp and none of them used the traditional media. That the major reasons why they used the social media are because it is cheaper and accessible and many youths can be reached there.

What majorly informed their choice of one network instead of the other was because the network had more enticing messages and pictures and more factual messages.

### **Conclusion/ Recommendations**

This study has clearly demonstrated that social media is the easiest way to reach the voiceless in the society especially the youth as it is much more cheaper, easier to access and people have the freedom to express themselves freely. Thus the following recommendations:

1. The youths should be directed (by their parents and teachers) on how to use the social network sites positively to change situations rather than negatively.
2. The media professionals should not see the social media as being in conflict with the traditional media but rather encourage those who cannot use the traditional media for varied reasons to use the social media.
3. The media professionals should device means of controlling the social media to ensure that the social media messages are reliable.
4. The human right activist should encourage the less privileged to use the social media to express themselves.
5. Those in power should visit the social media network to discover the feelings of the masses and if possible should also use the social media in reaching the people instead of only traditional media.
6. Every politician who wants to go far in Nigeria's new democracy should be present in the social media.
7. The social media should be viewed as an instrument of change rather than a play ground.

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