



**ASSOCIATION OF
COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS
& PROFESSIONALS OF NIGERIA
BOOK SERIES**

Social Media, Political Communication and Governance in Nigeria

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To cite this article:

Eric Msughter Aondover, Lawal Umar Maradun, & Onaopepo Ibrahim Bamidek (2025), Social Media, Political Communication and Governance in Nigeria in Digital Communication and Governance in Africa: Reimagining AI in Communication and Governance ACSPN Book Series 10, pp. 205— 228 Retrieved from <http://www.acspn.com.ng>

(Institutional or Subscribed access may be required)

Please note that this is an electronic, pre-print version of this article published by the Evan Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited for Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN).

The ACSPN Book Series is exclusive to the Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria.

ISBN: 978-978-690-135-0

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Layout/Design: Ashroph De Grafico Ventures.

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CHAPTER 11

Social Media, Political Communication and Governance in Nigeria

*Eric Msughter AONDOVER,
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The use of social media in Nigeria is a fascinating journey that mirrors global trends while incorporating unique local dynamics. The evolution of social media in Nigeria is a testament to the country's adaptability and innovation in the digital age. From early Internet forums to the dynamic and multifaceted social media landscape of today, Nigerians have embraced and shaped these platforms to reflect their unique cultural and social contexts. From the way people live, communicate, and do business down to the governance

processes, the digital age has transformed transactions and ushered in new paradigms in all activities (Maradun & Msughter, 2022). The Internet and platforms in the digital space has become a global forum for synthesizing opinions and thoughts and sharing ideas on governance, relationships, and every other thing the human mind can think or do. During the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, a majority of the aspirants across the political parties utilised the social media to disseminate their campaign messages.

The pervasiveness of social media has made it to become an integral part of public discourse and communication in society today (Aondover & Pate, 2021). Since the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, political engagements and participations have witnessed a tremendous change. In this regard, the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (X) and WhatsApp has facilitated the spread of political information, established new means of online political participation and also modified users' political attitudes and involvement (Ibrahim & Labaran, 2020).

According to Owens-Ibie (2016), the increased availability of ICT devices has made it possible for citizens to actively engage in the production and dissemination of media messages. Social networking site usage has increased opinion sharing and turned formerly passive recipients into active participants in the creation and reception of communication messages. But audience members tend to use social networking sites (SNS) without thinking about questions of ethics and morality when playing politics (Mojaye & Aondover, 2022). With this massive online presence and vibrancy of activities engaged in by Nigerians on social media, it is to be expected that social media texts-tweets, posts, comments, pictures, videos and online discussion become sources and channels of communication among the public (Maradun et al., 2021). Therefore, social media

platforms have changed how quickly and easily people communicate across social and geographical boundaries. Millions of people worldwide can now quickly access any digital content, compared to the past, when gatekeepers controlled and negotiated access to mass media platforms (Owens-Ibie, 2019).

Social media has great impact across diverse areas of social life, it can be said that the greatest sphere of influence impacted upon is political communication and democracy. Strengthening this line of thought, Kietzmann in Maradun et al., (2021) posited that the Internet's pro-democratic potentials includes the promise to provide an improved forum for debate, it involves geographically disparate citizens, where issues of relevance matter, social status is less important and arguments are evaluated based on their strength. Invariably, social media, being the most conspicuous aspect of web 2.0 architecture provides rich information environment as well as tendencies for instantaneous and deliberative communication upon which democracy can blossom.

Therefore, political communication plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion, influencing policy decisions, and fostering democratic participation. Political communication is a dynamic field that reflects changes in technology, media, and society. It is central to the functioning of modern democracies, influencing how political ideas are conveyed, how leaders are elected, and how public policies are shaped. Political communication and governance are deeply interconnected, as the way information shared within a political system directly affects the quality, effectiveness, and legitimacy of governance. Political communication is integral to effective governance, influencing how policies are understood, accepted, and implemented. As technology and society evolve, the relationship between communication and governance will continue to be a critical area of focus for political leaders, policymakers, and citizens alike.

Within this context, this paper examines social media, political communication and governance in Nigeria. The three overarching objectives of this chapter are to discuss the role of the social media in political communication in Nigeria; explore strategies involved in the deployment of social media platforms for mobilization and political deliberations; and interrogate influences of the social media on governance and decisions in politics.

Media's Role in Political Communication in Nigeria

In an age of mediated communication, face-to-face political communication is becoming almost impossible to all the social groups constituting the society. The most common contact point between politicians and the audiences is through the media. The media offer avenue for information delivery in a comprehensible and accessible manner (Aondover et al, 2022). Esser, Reinemann and Fan cited by Aondover et al, (2023) note that for a long string of reasons, it has become increasingly difficult and at the same time increasingly important for government leaders and vote-seeking politicians to communicate effectively to the electorate through the mass media. Prasad in Aondover et al, (2022) also notes that the mass media are important in shaping the political process.

The power of the press in agenda setting and political discourse has been succinctly captured by White in Hile et al., (2023) thus:

The power of the press in America is a primordial one. It sets the agenda of the public discussion; and this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. It determines what people will talk and think about an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins (p.247).

Accordingly, the media have a complex relationship with sources of power and the political system. McQuail (2014) says that a responsible nationwide democratic system requires a media system which can generate objective and nonpartisan discussion. In the Nigerian political scene, right from the British rule to the struggle for independence and up to the present democratic dispensation, the media have been central to all the processes (Oso, 2010). The pre-independence Nigerian press was not only a prelude and platform where the nation's journalism sprung from but also produced vibrant journalists who amply used their profession to provide the necessary oxygen for the fight against colonialism. The nationalist struggle saw journalists in the forefront which eventually led to Nigerian Independence in 1960. Kukah cited by Maikaba and Msughter (2019) supports that journalism was the major vehicle through which anti-colonial struggle was embarked. Newspaper publishers, journalists, commentators and editors were the famous personalities in the movement. They included Herbert Macaulay, Nnamdi Azikwe, Ernest Ikoli, Obafemi Awolowo, Anthony Enahoro, Dutse Mohammed Ali, Mokwugo Okoye. The press of that day was seen as the most distinguished intellectual forum in Nigerian history. This was because the media provided public sphere for high standard debates and discussions which culminated in national Independence.

Therefore the separation of press and politics in Nigeria is unthinkable. First, prior to 1999, the press was engaged in the process of entrenching democracy. Second, the media focused on election process. Thirdly, the attention was centered on monitoring of governance and finally the general interpretation of the democratic process (Pate, 2011). Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides thus: "The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the fundamental objectives contained in this chapter and uphold the responsibility and

accountability of the government to the people”.

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Social Media and Political Communication

The social media renders enormous contributions in the political process in Nigeria. These contributions could be positive or negative. According to Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (2012), the 2011 elections in Nigeria witnessed a remarkable use of the social media as a tool for political communication. According to Oyenuga (2015) aside from this, the social media were equally used as a weapon to undermine and even destroy the image of "other" political parties, especially the People's Democratic Party and All Progressive Party. More people are switching to this new media for information as they spend more time in the virtual platform.

Omoruyi (2015) observes the prevalence of Internet memes on prominent personalities by the users of social media in Nigeria. According to Cromey (2010, p.1)

“inappropriate manipulation of scientific digital images typically does not arise from an intent to deceive or to obscure information. More often the inappropriate manipulations are simply due to

ignorance of the basic principles.”

It seemed to this author that often what is needed is an explanation of why manipulations are right or wrong. In more ways than the traditional media, social media networks, particularly Facebook and Twitter (X), played central roles in Nigeria's 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections. Omowole (2015) writes on “7 social media marketing lessons from 2015 Presidential election”. He pointed out how the social media especially Facebook were used in the campaign that culminated into the victory of an opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari. The election resulted into the defeat, for the first time in Nigeria, of an incumbent President (Kperogi, 2015, pp.28-29).

Omoruyi (2015) notes the use of Internet memes in the campaigns via social media, especially the Facebook. From the Photoshop images of President Jonathan (GEJ) carrying his luggage from Abuja across a river to Otuoke village to General Buhari's (GMB) dictator-turned-democrat ludicrous photos, Nigerian youths brusquely captioned and captured the presidential candidates in whatever light they wanted the world to see. Other studies on social media bordered on citizen participation in social media for political campaigns (Norwak, 2016). See pictures that were used on social media below:



Source: Facebook, 2015



Source: Facebook, 2015

Similarly, some of the studies are on political opinion expressed in social media and election outcomes -US Presidential Elections (Barclay et al., 2014). Oyenuga (2015) conducted a study on “social media participation and pollution of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria”, but this does not talk about photographs of candidates during the election. It is based on this that Dahmen (2016) recommends that future research should consider the study of visuals on these devices, taking into consideration responsive design and how that affects the visual presentation of candidates via Web 2.0 and social media channels.

While research has already begun in this area, scholarship should continue to systematically investigate visuals within the context of political communication in the digital age. Another important issues noted in this study is the increased political communication or participation via photographs. The ephemerality of photographs has further been seen in the way in which these photographs can be altered depending on circumstances, users and intent of the users. This leads to the issue of vanishing of authorship (Hand, 2012). Social media are group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Recently, social media such as SNS, weblogs, microblogging, and wikis play an increasingly important role in shaping political communication in the Nigeria and around the world. The potentials of social media appear to be most promising in political context as they can be an enabler for more participation and democracy. Ogundimu (2013) sees public participation as the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision making. The so-called e-participation focuses not only on this process but also on using the Internet as an additional or exclusive instrument to create dialogues between government and the governed.

Karpf (2009) introduces the notion of "politics 2.0," which can be understood as the harnessing of the Internet's lowered transaction costs and its condition of information abundance, toward the goal of building more participatory, interactive political institutions. There is a growing body of research focusing on the role of social media in political deliberation. The presidential campaign in Nigeria in 2023 has shown that social media technologies have become increasingly important for political communication and persuasion. It became obvious, that social media could be successfully adapted to contact and discuss with voters as well as to disseminate important information to them. Especially young people were inspired to political topics using social media as communication platform.

As a result, the rise of social media has provoked renewed debates on the role of mass media generally, and social media in particular; in political communication. Flew (2008) argued that the rise of the Internet coincided with less participation and growing dissatisfaction with representative democracy. In this context, the internet is perceived as a 'magic bullet' that would catapult citizen participation and hence legitimise the representative democratic system. Another view is a little pessimistic: it projects little influence of the Internet platforms on political communication and instead argues that it is basically offline structures of political, economic and other sources of power that often tend to be mirrored online, the so-called normalisation hypothesis. Therefore, social media can thus be viewed as capable of overcoming coordination problems inherent with political mobilisation work because of its capability to creating broader networks managing larger groups of people of varying interests.

Omoruyi (2015) observes that social media users in Nigeria frequently share online memes featuring well-known individuals. Cromey (2010, p. 1) claims that the "Inappropriate manipulation

of scientific digital images typically does not arise from an intent to deceive or obscure information". The improper manipulations most frequently result from a fundamental understanding of the principles. For instance, social media networks, especially Facebook and Twitter, were more influential in Nigeria's 2015, 2019 and 2023 presidential elections than traditional media (Aondover et al, 2023). Omowole (2015) writes on seven social media marketing lessons from the 2015 presidential election. He pointed out how social media, especially Facebook, was used in the campaign that culminated in the victory of an opposition candidate, Muhammadu Buhari. The election resulted in the defeat, for the first time in Nigeria, of the former president

Social Media Mobilization and Political Deliberations

In African nations like Egypt and Nigeria, social media has emerged as a significant forum for political discussion and mobilization around pressing concerns. More than 20,000 people were rallied in two days to protest Israel's 2009 bombing of Gaza using Facebook and word-of-mouth. Obama's campaign in the US was successful in registering new voters and engaging them in his political process (Castells, 2009). Scholars such as Biswas et al (2014) have suggested that social media serves as a mobilizing instrument for young, allowing them to openly express their opinions on any subject, particularly in opposition to social activities such as corruption and breaches of human rights.

That being said, this is not totally accurate. June et al (2011) discovered in Korea that individuals are becoming more circumspect about their ideas and posts on social media in an effort to keep themselves from being held responsible for anything. Self-representation can mitigate the influence of social media platforms on political discourse (Storsul, 2011). Given that people in Norway are aware of how they display themselves on social media, research has indicated that online representation is

a reflexive process. For instance, Storsul (2011) argues that high awareness of self-representation influences how teenagers use Facebook for political purposes in Norway, where they post things they think won't offend others in their network and view online political debates as risky because of self-representation. Teenagers also carefully choose which political groups to join, what causes to support, how they join events and publish pictures, and whether or not to engage in political discussion.

Raising citizens' knowledge levels through deliberate action is essential to their ability to reconsider their current political inclinations. According to Biswas et al (2014), individuals who participate in political discourse on social media can become invaluable resources by disseminating information and swaying the views of others. For instance, social activist Anna Hazare used Facebook in April 2011 to put pressure on the Indian government to form a private-public committee to explore anti-corruption legislation. The campaign's usage of Facebook was partially responsible for its success.

Niemeyer (2011) argues that deliberative democracy is predicated on widespread engagement in the political process, wherein the results are determined by the activation of citizenship. According to Dryzek cited in Niemeyer (2011), communicative reasoning devoid of strategic manipulation is what citizens should ideally be doing. However, their participation necessitates an attitude of reciprocity, an open mind, and the acceptance of other people's ideas as legitimate. According to Niemeyer's (2011) theory, a positive consensus takes the shape of a meta-consensus, where in inter-subjective debate produces a common understanding of significant concerns and acceptable potential solutions without necessarily agreeing on the precise result

Consistency inter-subjectivity is the state in which people concur about the reasons behind their choices, indicating that they comprehend the reasons behind their preferences. This contrasts with symbolic politics, in which powerful individuals strategically utilise arguments that draw attention to specific symbols in order to influence public opinion in an area that is dominated by political spin doctors. Niemeyer (2011) claims that manipulation does place in surface-level democracies when organised interest cleverly seeks popular acceptance for political legitimacy. Niemeyer (2011) contends that the differences between the political players' incentives to achieve specific results and their remoteness from issues impacting the population contribute to the manipulation.

Niemeyer's (2011) case study on Australia's Bloomfield Track demonstrates how deliberative democracies can produce meta-consensus by emancipating citizens and enabling them to form a common understanding of the matter at hand through compelling and pertinent arguments. Additionally, Sauter and Bruns (2013) discovered that Australian citizens, journalists, and politicians have embraced social media sites like Facebook and Twitter (X) to support their political engagements through campaigns, information retrieval or dissemination, and interaction with other players in the political public sphere. For instance, lawmakers in the UK have begun interacting with their people on Twitter. According to Seggaard's (2015) research, Norwegians who initially show minimal interest in politics eventually become more engaged on social media. However, it has been discovered that the most likely people to utilise social media for political objectives are those who are highly engaged offline and have strong political interests.

Social Media Influence on Governance and Decisions in Politics

The core political values resist change, while there is discernible unrest at the margin of Nigerian politics (Ogundimu, 2013). A brief account of the intersection between digital technology and two contemporary issues of concern, the government and the governed illustrate how ICT's are becoming a staple of the political discourse. For instance, the Government's removal of the gasoline subsidy on 1st January 2012 caused a sudden rise in the price of basic necessities, ranging from transport to foodstuffs. The consequent public unrest was orchestrated on social media. Many Nigerians took to the streets to demand a reversal of the decision. Protests paralysed many cities, eventually forcing the Government to restore a partial subsidy. In 2020, the #EndSars protest ravages the pages of social media all over Nigeria with pictures showing EndSars and the outcome of the protest as well as the decision of the 2024 by the Nigerians to end bad government via nationwide protest. The use of social media was reportedly instrumental in the protests, galvanising divergent ethnic and religious groups in a rare show of unity. The protests were successful in that information sharing among educated Nigerians through social media greatly increased, and several corruption probes into the petroleum industry were instigated, even if the findings of such probes were never implemented. It is evidence that the use of social media in Nigeria both amplifies and trivialises issues of concern.

The slogan #BringsBackOurGirls was used by citizens, social groups and civil society organisations campaigning for the release of the missing girls. The hashtag campaign raised global awareness of the plight of the missing girls, and also highlighted the government's failure to rescue them. While it focused attention on the crime, it also focused public attention on the government's inability to remedy their plight. The emergence of Boko Haram can be interpreted as a microcosm of Nigerian frailty

and failings. It began as a peaceful movement, calling for the adoption of a purer form of Islam while criticising government corruption. But since 2000, in response to military brutality, jihadist ideology, and the passivity of the Federal Government, and lacking an institutional or representative gateway, it has developed into a terrorist group and become a rebuke to government ineptitude (Smith, 2015).

These and other incidents, track the shifting ethos of online journalism from objectivity to a greater emphasis on participation and authenticity, which is better suited to the values of community media. It resonates with a mistrust of institutional power and locates authenticity in the diversity of voices who debate it, educated urban elites, government departments, media organisations and agencies, rather than the political masters of institutional power. Although the process is gradual, these groups already perceive Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as mouthpieces for the expression of their goals, and as tools to assist them in the struggle for improved national democracy. Below are some of the pictures that were used on social media during the 2024 protest tagged #Endbadgovernance in Nigeria:



Source: Facebook, 2014



Source: Facebook, 2014

Theoretical Framework

This chapter espouses the postulations of Media Determinism Theory and Diffusion of Innovation Theory. Media Determinism Theory is an offshoot of the Technological Determinism Theory

as developed by Thorsten Veblen and expanded by Clarence Ayres which assumes that technology is most fundamental determinant of a society's social, political and economic structure and values. Technological Determinism is a reductionist theory whose first major elaboration came from Karl Marx who argued that changes in productive technology are the primary influence on human social relation and organisational structural and that social relations and cultural practices revolve around the technological and economic base of the society.

Media Determinism Theory is a philosophical and sociological position which posits the power of the media technology to impact socio-political and economic development in society as conceived and expanded by Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. These scholars see the media as instrumental to all forms of civilization in society (Ya'u, 2020). McLuhan argues that media technology is the driver of socio-cultural phenomena and that socio-cultural, political and economic development of each historical period can be related directly to the means of communication of that period. He concludes that media technology is always alive and capable of shaping human behaviour and societal development

One of the best known examples of technological determinism in media theory is McLuhan's "the medium is the message" a phrase coined by McLuhan to argue that the form of a media technology embeds itself in the message it conveys and creates a symbiotic relationship in which the medium influences how the message is disseminated. This means that it is the form of the media that matters and not the content. Thus, media technology affects and influences socio-political and cultural development (Ya'u, 2020).

A contemporary example of media form and its agency on human societies is the social media and social networking sites which affect and influence human political, economic and cultural

communication behaviour. These platforms expand the frontier of political participation and socio-economic relations in both develop and emerging democratic societies. Media technology is therefore alive and capable of shaping human behaviour. McLuhan argued that family life, the work place, schools, healthcare, religion, politics, friendship and recreation are all influence by media technology hence concludes that every new form of media technology is an extension of some human faculty.

Critics of the theory argue that the proposition in the theory is too simplistic. They believe that social movements define technology and media processes and that audience determinism should be the viewpoint in media determinism. However, the theory is relevant to this study as it postulations help us to understand the application of social media in political participation using new media technologies to influence socio-economic and political participation in society.

Similarly, as propounded by Rogers (2003), the Diffusion of Innovation Theory, is that news ideas that spread to tribes of people or communities must first be accepted, adopted and then acted upon by recipients of such ideas. This depends on what filters they draw in the context of influence, people who come into contact with a new idea and perceive it as a novelty are often ready to change from their old ways of doing things to the innovative ones introduced to them. These assumptions were no different from people using social media to participate in elections, especially in this era of new media technologies.

Diffusion of Innovations is used to describe the process of adopting new innovations, a theory that has been used by researchers from different disciplines such as education, public health, political science, communication, history and so on. Rogers' (2003) perspective of Diffusion of Innovations has been appropriate in investigating the adoption of technology to spread

innovation from an institution within a society to other parts of that society. For Rogers (2003), the words “technology” and “innovation” mean more or less the same thing. Technology is composed of hardware and software. The hardware is “the tool that embodies the technology in the form of material or physical object”, while “software is the information base for the tool” (Siraj, 2020).

Therefore, since 1995, studies have used Diffusion of Innovations as theoretical framework. Hence, Diffusion of Innovations can be an appropriate theoretical approach to this study. For instance, social media adoption by Nigerians with the aim of political participation can influenced them to use social media in participating in politics, which will increase the participation people in governance. By involving in political participation using social media, Nigerians can deploy news ways to mobilise and encourage others to participate in governance.

Conclusion

This chapter examines social media, political communication and governance in Nigeria. It was discovered that social media served as an avenue for political communication. The social media has remarkably contributed to the citizen democratic engagement by candidates, politicians, journalists, public relations practitioners, and the general public. The chapter highlights how the social networking sites served as avenue that contributed to the citizen democratic engagement, the application of unhindered freedom of expression, ephemerality of photographs, vanishing of authorship in relation to the creation, distribution and consumption of political messages on social media. Social media, being the most conspicuous aspect of web 2.0 architecture provides rich information environment as well as tendencies for instantaneous and deliberative communication upon which democracy can blossom. The discourse on the political imperatives of media in raising the

issues of governance and political participation to the plane of discourse, reflects on Habermas, Mongenthau and Max's ideals of the public sphere. Thus, political communication between the state and its citizens is considered a very fundamental principle in developing the public sphere. This is because; information plays a vital function in helping the public to have a considerable public opinion rather than merely a state of consensus. The chapter concludes that the advancement of ICT has democratised and facilitated access as well as use of social media to promote constructive public discussion on critical socio economic and political issues between government officials and the public.

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