

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE FORMATION OF GOVERNMENT POLICIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract: By understanding how new media influences policies with reference to the Nigerian political landscape, scholars can now begin to understand how much social media has evolved in Nigeria and with the knowledge, form the basis for further studies into other similar countries. This work shall act as bedrock for further studies into social change, diplomacy and government legislation as influenced by social media. Two important incidents that took place in Nigeria in the past 3 years shall be studied through relevant news articles, online content analysis and professional journals, to find out the role social media played during these situations. Based on the findings of the research, the role of social media and how it influenced government decisions were briefly highlighted in this work. From the findings, it is clear that social networking was a major driving force in determining the outcome of the events under study.

INTRODUCTION

This piece aims to look at the role social media plays in shaping government policies and influencing such policies in developing countries with particular reference to Nigeria.

Nigeria as a nation has been mostly ruled by the military for the most part of the last 53 years and as such the government has always been in firm control of the media. In 1992 the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission was established and it immediately put an end to government monopoly. This only led to something different but definitely not a free press; political partisanship became the order of the day with newspapers and other media outfits that sprung up in the 90s. For instance Tribune and Daily sketch (two privately owned newspaper outfits) were basically used to advance the interest of Obafemi Awolowo while the Concord group (another privately owned paper) was used to advance the political interest of its founder; Chief MKO Abiola. Today there are over 100 privately owned media houses in Nigeria, but a large chunk of these are owned or managed by friends of those in power and as such cannot truly be categorised as a free press.

This situation is not unique to Africa or Nigeria, it should be recalled that Woodrow Wilson shortly after he was elected president of America in 1916 for the second time, successfully used the media to promote the idea of going to war, “turning a pacifist population into a hysterical, war-mongering population which wanted to destroy everything German (Chomsky, 1997). Gadhafi also tried to use the media to propagate a happy Libya even during the crisis that would lead to his demise, he filmed and promoted those parts of Libya that were least affected by the war and tried to deceive the world into believing Libya was at peace (Simon Cottle, 2011).

Noam Chomsky (1997), in his book titled media control explained that they are two concepts of democracy, the first one considers democracy as a situation whereby the people have a say in how their affairs are run and have a means to participate meaningfully where information is open and free. The second concept of democracy is that the government is in full control and the public must be barred from the management and running of their own affairs; here information is rigidly controlled. This work relates more with the first concept of democracy and is hereby trying to study how the public through the use of social media has influenced government decisions and policies. This work shall draw inspiration from the work of Thorstein Veblen on Technological determinism; he explains that a society’s technology drives the development of its social structure and cultural values. This paper shall also seek to determine if this true to Nigeria.

With the emergence of internet in Nigeria and later the popularization of blackberry in the early 2000s, Nigerians suddenly had access to news from all over the world, so it came has no surprise that people in the country started demanding for accountability from their leaders and reporting government excesses on numerous blogs and websites that naturally sprung up with the emergence of internet access in the country. In fact it was access to popular services like twitter, blackberry messenger (BBM), Facebook amongst others that would set the stage for some of the most popular uprisings against government policies and other social injustices in Nigeria. Due to time and space constraints, this paper takes a look at two events that rocked Nigeria in the past 3 years and how social media played a role in facilitating the protest and influencing government decisions. The main objective of this paper is to identify the roles social media played in influencing government decisions as regards the events

under review. It is the hope of the researcher that at the end of this paper the question of whether or not social media has any influence on government decision would have been properly answered.

METHODOLOGY

This research is a summary of relevant conclusions from different journals and newspaper articles on the subject. The research shall look at two issues that ravaged Nigeria in recent times, namely: The 2011 general elections and ALUU4 lynching. These cases were chosen based on their media popularity and the fact that the whole nation was affected in some way by the situation. The researcher shall examine relevant literature, news articles, press releases and other media that covered the events stated above. Also content analysis shall be conducted; the analysis shall be based on the comment sections of YouTube videos for the ALUU4, while Twitter and Facebook entries shall be analysed for the elections. The responses of the public to these issues would be collated and critically analysed. By doing so, it is the hope of this research to answer the following questions:

1. Did the suggestions of the people on social networks and blogs, correlate with the final decision of the government or party concerned?
2. Can social networking be used as a tool for social change?

CASE STUDY 1: THE ELECTIONS OF 2011

In 2011, Nigeria was ready for its 4th democratic general elections. The elections would fill up Local, State and federal Level positions in the country. Because of the well-known corrupt practices of those in power and the fact that Nigeria ranked high among the most corrupt countries in the world, there was a general atmosphere of apprehension and a sense of powerlessness during the times leading to the elections of 2011. However the popularity of social networking and BBM services in the country at the time gave Nigerians an avenue to air their grievances and act as some sort of watchdog during the election. The incumbent president acknowledged the influence and power of the social media that he first made his intention to run for president known on his Facebook page, making him the first Nigerian president to do so. Social media played such a major role in monitoring and campaigning that the 2011 elections have been dubbed “Facebook election”.

Table 1: Candidate’s use of Social Networks (during 2011 elections)

FACEBOOK						
Candidate	URL	No. of Fans	Ave comments per post	Ave likes per post	Party	Office sought
Goodluck Jonathan	www.facebook.com/jonathangoodluck	521,129	2,295	2,076	PDP	President
Nuhu Ribadu	www.facebook.com/ribadu	173,103	170	215	ACN	President
Tunde Fashola	www.facebook.com/batundefashola	119,631	40	102	CAN	Governor
TWITTER						
Candidate	Twitter ID	No. of Tweets	Following	Followers	Party	Office sought
Dele Momodu	DeleMomodu2011	1792	4145	129	NCP	President
Tunde Fashola	TundeFashola	1,504	41	20497	CAN	Governor
Muhammed Buhari	Buhariforchange	644	1137	10	CPC	President

Data Source: author’s research and assessment

It is noteworthy that most of the politicians listed above just started using social networking at the start of the election campaign of 2011 and their online presence has dramatically increased over time. For instance Dele Momodu, who had less than 200 followers on twitter at the start of campaign had over a 100,000 followers by the end of 2011.

The elections marked the first time that social media and other forms of connectivity have given Nigerians an opportunity to act as some sort of citizen observers during the elections (www.movements.org, 2011). During this election a lot of organisations harnessed the power of social media to ensure a free and credible election. ReclaimNaija.net, Enough is Enough and SaharaReporters.com are some of the Organizations that created a platform for Nigerians to interact and report any unseemly behaviour during the elections. According to movement.org, the use of social media during the elections of 2011 proved to be particularly helpful in the larger cities of Nigeria; Lagos and Abuja and less effective in the more rural areas due to access. In Lagos and Abuja,

the writer attributes the relatively freer and fairer elections to the use of social media as watchdogs and observers of the voting process. It can be said that because of the ease of accessing this new media and the fact that it is readily available in Nigeria now, social media is revolutionizing election administration and coverage. One analyst stated that “the widespread use of these real-time media severely limited electoral malpractices ...” (Omokri 2011). This was also supported by Jega; the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of Nigeria by saying that the use of social media during the elections of 2011 made it more transparent and made the INEC more accountable to the people. (Cited in Social Media and the 2011 elections in Nigeria).

The sheer availability of new media is changing the electoral environment, where previous elections were often manipulated behind the scenes with results altered by politicians and the electoral commission itself (Asuni & Farris, 2011). It means even untrained citizens and illiterates could give their unbiased opinion on the electoral process on a safe and reliable platform.

The 2011 elections in Nigeria, gives us a unique opportunity to understand the role social media played in shaping societal expectations and behaviour which in itself informs government policies.

CASE 2: THE ALUU 4 CASE

On the 5th of October, 2012 four (4) university of Port Harcourt students were stripped naked, beaten and later burnt to death on suspicion of armed robbery (this case was popularly known as the UNIPORT4 or ALUU4 killings), And it was all caught on camera. The media frenzy this killing generated is unprecedented and never been experienced in a country where “Jungle Justice” is the order of the day. No newspaper, TV or Radio media outlet covered these killings, but it was not until different blogs started covering it and Broadcast messages started surfacing on BBM and international networks like the BBC and Aljazeera became interested that some Nigerian media houses thought it news worthy. In fact one news reporter with the National Mirror in their first coverage of the ALUU 4 case on October 24, 2012 stated that, “Interestingly, since the story and the video became viral several conflicting reports have emerged including the complicity of the Nigeria Police in the killing of these young men. This has generated both local and international attention in the last two weeks”. Another observer noted that “There have been lots of cases involving jungle justice all over Nigeria especially the streets of Lagos. One guesses the reason for the uproar over this is because it is closer to home by the existence of social media which one is grateful for” (Ynaija news; November, 2012).

In conclusion, Fidelis Duker (2012) in his column on the national Mirror stated that “To me, one of the lessons from the killing of the ALUU four is the power of social media, which was able to expose this grave atrocity and help in apprehending some of the perpetrators of the dastardly act”. According to Channels TV (one of the most reputable news stations in Nigeria) “the Nigerian senate passed a resolution asking the police and security agencies to fish out the perpetrators of the crime including the spectators captured in the video making the rounds (on YouTube and Blackberry) and try them for murder”. The Senate President, David Mark, thanked social networking sites for helping get the news across during the senate plenary session on Aluu 4, he said “With the help of social media, the faces of the killers of the boys were identified” (Cited on Bella Naija, 2012). This shows how powerful the social media has become. For the first time in recent history, the Nigerian government was forced to make a decision to apprehend perpetrators of jungle justice in Nigeria.

Below is a table showing the public’s response to the crisis based on YouTube comments

Table 2: YouTube Video on ALUU4 lynching comments Analysis

Variable	Frequency	%Frequency
Call for arrest	15	4.4
Outrage at Jungle justice	53	15.3
Support lynching	10	2.9
Asking for change	14	4.1
Condemning	252	73.3
Total	344	100

Source: Author’s research and analysis

With 304,070 views on one YouTube Video out of the over 6,000 videos with each of them having not less than 1000 views and most having more than 20,000 views. There were a total of 1368 comments but only 344 were used in this analysis, because most were either written in a language indecipherable to the researcher or where unrelated to the video (spam).

From the table it is clear that about 73% of the total respondents out rightly condemned the act, while 15% showed outrage by cursing the perpetrators, asking that they be massacred etc., while only about 2.9% supported the act on the grounds that they felt the boys were armed robbers and as such must have caused similar pains to other people.

The outrage and pouring out of emotions against the murder of the young students forced the Nigerian government into arresting some members of the community that were involved in the murder. This is the first time such a step has been taken in the case of Jungle Justice in Nigeria.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

From the foregoing it is clear that social media such as Facebook, twitter and blackberry messengers played a significant role in bringing the attention of the government to the problems stated above and instigated mass protest in some cases. Here is a highlight of some of the roles social media played:

1. Social media helped in documenting some of the activities such as seen in the 2011 general elections and all major activities in the country since that time. The ALUU 4 killings, the fuel subsidy protest were well documented on you tube, blogs and other websites, that would make it possible for future generations to access them.
2. Coordinating activities: this was clearly seen during the Fuel Subsidy removal protest, the 2011 elections and the change of name of University of Lagos. Social media were employed to organise the protest, from mobilising individuals to mapping out venues for the protest and organising rallies. Facebook, BBM and twitter helped a lot in making all these possible.
3. Creating a more objective avenue for people to air their opinions that would otherwise have not been heard at all. Social networking sites created a forum or a platform for people to vent and make their voices heard.
4. Create an avenue for the masses to talk to the government: Social media have created a way for people to talk to the government directly as most political office holders including the president has a Facebook page. This was previously not possible as the best people could do was relate their problems through organised labour groups.
5. Create an avenue for government to check the pulse of the people before making certain decisions, this can also be seen from the Fuel Subsidy removal protest, as one of the major reasons people were offended was that the government did not inform them beforehand before such an important decision was made.
6. Create an alternate medium for people to source for news and information.

HOW DOES THIS INFLUENCE GOVERNMENT POLICIES?

In the case of the general elections of 2011, it is very clear that social media changed the landscape of Nigeria's electoral process and balloting. The government was forced to set up a committee and an independent observer to monitor the use of social media during the electoral process. Several bodies such as the reclaim Nigeria and Enough is Enough came up and provided a platform for people to send in the observations and report any incidents during the electoral process. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) experienced over 25 Million hits on its website in just three days during the presidential elections. The chairman of the commission, Prof. Jega noted that the internet and particularly social media has made the electoral process more transparent and provided documentation on the electoral proceedings in the country which would help future elections.

Also based on the findings of a coalition of different interest groups that formed the Social Media tracking Centre, a report was submitted to INEC and other stakeholders on how they can further make use of social media to foster more transparent elections in the future. These recommendations if followed and implemented would further improve Nigeria's electoral process and encourage citizen participation.

The ALUU4 killings; the Nigerian Police Force (NPF) initially insisted that since it was a mob action, there was simply no way of knowing who the perpetrators where and arrest them. They insisted that it was impossible for the police to track down the killers, as it would amount to raiding a whole community. This however did not stop the protest going on social networking sites and blackberry, immediately people started extracting images from the YouTube video, and were calling on the police force to arrest the people clearly visible on the video. These pictures became viral on the internet and BBM.

By making these pictures viral, the public further proved the police wrong and showed them how to at least identify some of the perpetrators by watching the video and picking out their faces one at a time. This eventually led to the arrest of 13 ALUU community people including their traditional ruler. The case is currently still in court.

The ALUU case is a prime example of where social media has helped ensure justice was carried out. The images going viral online and call for justice put the government in a situation where it had act or be seen as irresponsible and insensitive.

Since the ALUU 4 incident, the police force has been making efforts to ensure the incidences of jungle justices in the country is reduced, and has promised to arrest and prosecute anyone involved in such.

CONCLUSION

The internet and social networks have opened up opportunities for Nigerians and changed our political landscape forever. It has given Nigerians a voice to air their grievances and to make their stance known. As far as elections and other social policies go, it is clear that Nigerians would no longer be spoon-fed untrue information as they now have the power to source for the news when and how they like. The social network and internet have given Nigerians and the world in general an avenue to meet and discuss life changing/threatening issues and proffer solutions to them. The internet shall forever play a major role in Nigeria's electoral process and in all government policies, as the internet would only get better and more accessible to Nigerians if current trend is to be taken seriously.

As one brilliant scholar in a video commentary said, technology and the electronic environment it creates is not going away, they will only continue to advance, they are the new media through which writers will now share their voice.

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