

INTERROGATING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON AFRICAN POLITICS

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact of social media on African politics focusing on how these platforms have influenced political discourse, citizen engagement, and government responsibility and accountability. The paper uses secondary sources of data and the data is analyzed within the arguments of the Network Society Theory by Manuel Castells which postulates that societies are shaped by relationships between individuals and groups through the interplay of technology and networked forms of communication. Findings from the data reveal that social media has transformed the political landscape in African countries by shaping their structural, political and governance processes through public opinions and public policy mobilization and action. The findings also reveal that while social media has provided new avenues for political participation and information dissemination, it has also presented challenges such as the spread of misinformation and the manipulation of negative public sentiment. The paper therefore recommends a moderation of social media through legislation that guarantees freedom of speech but also protects individuals and government against falsehood and blackmail.

Keywords: Africa, social media, Politics, Internet, Democracy, Elections

Introduction

In recent years, the proliferation of social media platforms has revolutionized the way information is disseminated, opinions are formed, and political discourse is conducted worldwide. This digital revolution has not spared the African continent, where social media has emerged as a powerful tool for communication, mobilization, and engagement among both political elites and ordinary citizens. The impact of social media on African politics is a topic of growing significance and relevance, as it shapes the dynamics of governance, activism, and public participation in the region.

Africa, a continent known for its diverse cultures, languages, and political landscapes, has seen a significant increase in internet penetration rates over the past decade. This growth has been accompanied by the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, which have become integral parts of everyday life for millions of Africans. The accessibility and reach of social media have enabled individuals to connect, share information, and express their opinions on a scale never seen before, transcending traditional barriers of time and space.

Against this backdrop, the intersection of social media and African politics presents a complex and multifaceted terrain for exploration. From facilitating political campaigns and mobilizing mass protests to exposing corruption and amplifying marginalized voices, social media has exerted a profound influence on the political landscape of many African countries. However, this influence is not without challenges, as the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and online manipulation has raised concerns about the potential negative impacts of social media on democratic processes and social cohesion. Jibo, (2014) states that social media has brought enormous transformation into the political space globally.

The internet has recently quickened political change in countries as diverse as Tunisia, the US, Britain and Libya, for example. The use of Facebook and twitter has linked people who share ideas across all human divides and this has brought about fundamental political change as was witnessed in the so-called Arab spring and elsewhere in the world. The biggest gain of humanity from the internet, it is generally believed, is the diffusion of democratic ideals for all mankind to appreciate and aspire to achieve.

Jibo is not alone in his succinct submission that the internet has had profound influence on politics in Africa and elsewhere. Vromen (2018) shares similar views.

Most other forms of political engagement tend to favour those with the most wealth or access. Not social media. It gives voice to anyone with a phone. In a time when political power is synonymous with economic power, the type of collective action social media makes possible is giving more people a say in the conduct of their governments and the society they live in.

Before the advent of social media, conventional media such as television, radio, newspapers and magazines had significant and monopolistic influence on political discourses. That was the era when gagging or censorship of the press was high. Most of the media organizations were owned and controlled by the government. In Nigeria for instance, Jibo, (2003) stated that,

... it is significant to observe that on the eve of the Olusegun Obasanjo's presidency, Nigeria had liberalised media ownership, thanks to decree 38 of 1992 which Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida had promulgated to allow private ownership of the electronic media. Until then, it was entirely government-owned. A number of individuals and organizations took advantage of this development and established radio and television stations; these include Ray Power F.M. Radio, African Independent Television [AIT] and Minaj Broadcast International [MBI] to mention a few examples.

The above scenario was prevalent in most African countries until social media emerged and became a potent tool for citizen journalism where the people could now take active part in information dissemination.

With social media, as far as one owns a phone, he/she can sit in the comfort zone of his/her house and express their opinion on any political discussion and such information can reach a good number of people in a very short time. One of the greatest advantages of social media is that it creates space for everybody irrespective of their social status in the society unlike other conventional means such as radio, television and newspaper where the elites and the government monopolized the media space. Through social media, both the rich and the poor contend for political space without the former dominating the latter. Vromen (2018) agrees with the above view by asserting that, while other forms of political engagement tend to gravitate towards members of the society with most wealth or access, social media does not. Rather; it provides opportunity to anyone with a phone. Similarly, Shirky (2008) provides further illumination on how social media has eliminated many barriers by noting that: "social tools" spur group-

formation and collective action by reducing the costs of communication and removing “two old obstacles – locality of information, and barriers to group reaction”. In other words, social media has broken down many hurdles to open up more political space for people irrespective of class or status to add their voices on major political developments in their societies.

There are 4.95 billion social media users globally (Statista, 2024). This means 61% of the global population uses social media. The global social media users are estimated to reach 5.17 billion by the end of 2024. According to Statista (2024), the number of social media users in Africa has risen continuously, amounting to over 384 million as of 2022. Social media penetration is considerably higher in Northern and Southern Africa than in other regions. As of February 2022, some 56 percent of the population in Northern Africa used social media, while the share was 45 percent in Southern Africa. Central Africa was significantly behind, with a share of only eight percent. In Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, social media users favoured WhatsApp. Statista (2024) reported that approximately 95.4% of internet users in South Africa use WhatsApp every month. In Nigeria, 91.9% of internet users use WhatsApp; in Kenya, 93.5% and in Ghana, 89.9%. The more people use the internet, the more they use WhatsApp. This is because WhatsApp has data privacy, end-to-end encryption, video and call functionality, and group function which makes it indispensable for companies, schools, churches, associations, groups of friends and many others. Many people rely on information from these platforms and use it to share information. On the other hand, Egyptian and Moroccan users preferred Facebook.

The data reveals that Nigerians spend the most time on social media on the African continent. As of the first quarter of 2023, Nigerians spent, on average, three hours and 44 minutes on different social media platforms. South Africans and Kenyans followed, spending three hours and 34 minutes and three hours and 32 minutes on social media, respectively.

Though the initial intention of its invention was not to be used as a medium for political mobilization and engagement, the social media has turned out, as it were, a major platform where people ventilate their opinions on major political, social and economic developments in their respective countries. Zuckerberg (2014) admitted to this fact by asserting that Facebook was not in the beginning created to be a company; it was designed to accomplish a social mission with the primary aim of linking people together. Vromen (2018) corroborated that social media platforms were not initially intended to be used as news or political stage, but to a large extent, that is what they have become.

One area the usage and impact of social media has been felt in Africa is in the aspect of democratization. Since its inception, individuals, groups, political parties and civil society groups have greatly used social media to deepen democratic culture. However, there is lack of consensus among researchers as regards the impact of social media as a political tool in the democratization process. While some scholars commend the role of social media in this regard, others have argued that social media is a threat to democracy. Arguing on the positive side of social media on political advancement scholars such as Stoycheff, Nisbet, & Epstein (2016), Bartlett, Krasodomski-Jones, Daniel, Fisher, Jespersion (2015), Ruijgrok, (2017) Reuter & Szakonyi (2015) cited in Placek (2018) espoused that social media can create a higher demand for democracy, intensify protest against autocrats, promote greater political awareness, increase awareness on issues of electoral malpractices and promote civic awareness and engagement. Other scholars such as Deb, Donohue, & Glaisyer (2017), Fitzpatrick (2018) and Chakrabarti (2018) intimated that social media platforms, together with the rise of partisan media in traditional channels, have worsened political divisions and polarization. Furthermore, some social media platforms reinforce divisions and create echo chambers that propagate more and

more extreme or biased views over time. Similarly, the problems of hate speech, fake news, and smear campaigns have also raised some controversy on the role of social media as a democratization tool. Sunstein (2018, p.1) has summarized the threat that social media poses to democracy as follows:

For social media and democracy, the equivalents of car crashes include false reports (“fake news”) and the proliferation of information cocoons and as a result, an increase in fragmentation, polarization and extremism. If you live in an information cocoon, you will believe many things that are false, and you will fail to learn countless things that are true. That’s awful for democracy.

It can, therefore, be stated with some level of certainty that there are mixed perceptions among scholars regarding the impact of social media on Africa politics. It is against this background that this paper seeks to appreciate these divergent views in the literature, by examining the impact of social media on Africa politics.

Clarification of Concepts

Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) view social media as a technology that permits for user-collaboration as well as User Generated Content (USG) which concentrates on individual participation and content creation. They added that, social media encompasses platforms such as blogs, social networking sites (such as Facebook and Twitter), content communities (such as YouTube), and collaborative projects (such as Wikipedia). Social media is also defined as a set of information technologies which enable interactions and networking (Oestreicher-Singer & Zalmanson, 2013). Similarly, Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011) described social media as a web-based application which offers functionality for sharing, relationships, group, conversation and profiles. Social media as used in this paper refers to a network of technological platforms (i.e. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram) that provide political space for people to be involved in the governance of their society.

Politics

The changing nature of politics makes it intricate, complex and more difficult than the physical sciences. This is due to the changing nature and the complexities of man. However, the word 'politics' is derived from a Greek word polis which means city state. The inhabitants of the city state were, naturally, citizens (Kepedi, 2013). The Greek polis, or city-state, was a resilient and adaptable political institution founded on the principles of citizenship, freedom, and equality.

Again, politics can be seen from subjective idealism or an ideal philosophical concept and existentialism which is the view from the point of reality. In the words of a Danish philosopher popularized by Sarte (1905) it is an indifferent and hostile world. This statement was corroborated by Aristotle (384-322 Bi) when he observed that man by nature is a political animal and by this, he meant that the essence of social existence is politics and that two or more men interacting with one another are invariably involved in a political relationship. This is so because man from time immemorial prefers social companionship to isolation. Several proponents conceptualized the term of politics as follows.

Laeswell (1937) in his famous book 'Politics' defined it as who gets what, when and how. He attempts to expand the horizon of the enquiry to look at politics in many other social settings other than formal public government. It helps underline the fact that politics is about decisions made by people concerning certain objectives which they consider desirable. Harold Laeswell in his definition, laid emphasis on, the role of power in the distribution of scarce resources. David

Easton in his political system (1953) looked at politics as a process through which binding decisions on the distribution of scarce values are made for a society in a world of change. It is in this light that he viewed politics as the authoritative allocation of values in an organized society. In the understanding of Ola (1995), politics is dealing with power. To him, it is the management and administration of power within an existing nation state and community which is an aggregate of people with shared boundaries, values and some mutual interests, feelings and behaviour. From a pluralist perspective, politics involves competitiveness between a varieties of interest group each pressing for its own advantage. Since no one group is seen to be dominant, politics is, therefore, a business of bargaining and compromise, essentially.

Methodological Framing

This paper is qualitative in nature and uses secondary sources of data such as books, journals, term papers and of secondary sources to obtain data.

Theoretical Framing

The paper adopted the Network Society Theory which was developed by Manuel Castells in the 1980s. Castells assumes that technological development is the most important individual precondition for the resurgence of networks (Castells, 1996). Castells (1989, p. 32) wrote that, these networks, which could not exist on such a large scale without the medium provided by new information technologies, are the emerging organizational form of our world, and have played a fundamental role in ensuring the restructuring process---. He supports his view with a claim that the emergence of networks as an efficient form of social organization is the result of three features that have proved their usefulness in the emerging techno-economic environment, namely flexibility, scalability and survivability (Castells, 2004a, p. 5-6; Castells, 2009, p. 23):

Flexibility: they can reconfigure according to changing environments, keeping their goals while changing their components. They go around blocking points of communication channels to find new connections. **Scalability:** they can expand or shrink in size with little disruption. **Survivability:** because they have no center, and can operate in a wide range of configurations, they can resist attacks to their nodes and codes, because the codes of the network are contained in multiple nodes that can reproduce the instructions and find new ways to perform.

To Castells (2004a; 2009), networks are sets of interconnected nodes, which process financial and other value flows with the help of new technologies. They are self-configurable, complex structures of communication and power, which cooperate and compete internally and externally according to interests expressed within the nodes using ultimately a binary logic of inclusion/exclusion. They have the capability of self-renewal in the sense that they may introduce new actors and content as conditions change. Their dynamic nature makes them flexible, scalable and survivable, which are needed in a continuously changing techno-economic environment.

The Network Society Theory emphasizes the transformative impact of digital communication technologies, including social media, on various aspects of society, including politics. According to this theory, social media have the potential to enable new forms of political participation, mobilization, and organization, and to facilitate the rapid dissemination of information and ideas. In the context of African politics, the framework has helped us to understand how social media have significant implications for political communication, citizen engagement, and the dynamics of social movements and political activism.

Social Media and Politics

Social media plays a pivotal role in democracy and democratization processes all over the world. Though, as correctly observed by Omojuwa (2015), elections may not be won on social media but they shape perceptions. In other words, social media has the capacity to deepen democratic thinking all over the world. For instance, Barack Obama made massive use of social media in his 2008 Presidential Campaign to mobilize the support of American youths to win election (Dipanwita, 2015). As a matter of fact, a study conducted by a public relations firm Edelman concluded that the “landslide victory” of Barack Obama in the 2008 election was due to his positive use of social media (Lutz, 2009). Similarly, the social media contributed in forcing the then Prime Minister of Iceland Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson to quit over the Panama Papers scandal (Polonski, 2016).

Case Studies of Social Media Influence on African Politics

Africa has not been left out of the social media wind blowing across the world. What is famously today referred to as the “Arab Spring” was triggered by the power of social media. The Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 demonstrated the transformative power of social media in contemporary global politics. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook were instrumental in mobilizing citizens to participate in mass protests and demonstrations across the Middle East and North Africa. By allowing for the rapid sharing of information and coordination of protests, social media played a crucial role in the success of the movement. The Arab Spring highlighted the potential of social media to challenge oppressive regimes and promote political change, ushering in a new era of activism and political engagement online (Wolfsfeld, et al., 2013). African case studies are presented below:

The Nigerian Case Study

In Nigeria, social media has continued to shape political events especially in the 2015 general election. Prior to the 2015 elections, many Nigerians used to congregate on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook to ventilate their frustration against government policies and actions (Omojua, 2015). The pressure from different social media users across Nigeria did help in no small measure in repositioning the political situation of the country at that time. The trend began a few years earlier when social media users in the country organized protests like "Enough Is Enough" in April of 2010 which eventually led to 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 pronounce him Acting President following the illness of President Umaru Yar'Adua (Omojua, 2015).

In a similar vein, Bartlett, Krasodonski-Jones, Fisher and Jespersen (2015) also provided evidence which suggested that Twitter was mostly used to mobilize and influence the electorates to vote for certain candidates in the 2015 election in Nigeria. In a similar analysis, Udoka (2015) observed that the 2015 general election was decided, dominated and directed by social media because the online platforms played a key role as watchdogs. As votes were still being counted at the polling units, the outcomes were immediately reported on various social media within minutes and when announced officially, the results were the same (Udoka, 2015). This means that most of the results provided by different social media platforms did not contradict the one officially announced by the electoral umpire. Suntai and Targema (2015) have provided evidence which suggest that social media played a critical role in democratization process in Nigeria.

They explained that in the build up to the 2015 general election, “Tweet meets and hangouts” were the in-thing within Nigerian online networks. They observed that during the 2015 election, Hashtags such as #MeetGej, #Febuhari, #, #WhyiwillvoteGEJ, #MarchforBuhari, #GMB15, #LagosForYou and #iHavedecided were promoted by politicians and their friends; while #NigeriaDecides, #Nigeria2015, #iPledgeToVote, #MyPVCnow, #GoVote, #VoteNoFight, etc, were promoted by civil society groups to increase citizens' awareness and involvement.

Different social media platforms also provided the Nigerian public with pictures and videos on Facebook and WhatsApp showing how party agents were nabbed by security operatives in the act of vote buying as well bringing into limelight the issue of underage voting in some states of the federation, consequently forcing INEC to swing into action (Apuke&Tunca, 2018). In a similar manner, Oseni (2015) also restated that during the collation of results, journalists and civil society groups used social media to update the Nigerian public as regards the results in different states of the federation. It is also on record according to Temitope and Ahmad (2017), that social media was used by APC in the 2015 election as an avenue for mobilizing people to vote and also collate and preserve results which greatly forestalled possible manipulation of election results in Nigeria.

Apuke and Tunca (2018) also opined that Nigeria has witnessed a significant rise in the use of social media platforms. They observed that in the Nigerian 2015 general election, Facebook was used due to its participatory nature. Apuke and Tunca (2018) argued further that different social media platforms were used by political parties in Nigeria for political organization, electioneering campaigns and mobilization of voters. For instance, while there is no doubt that many political parties contested for elections in Nigeria, the role played by the two major political parties in Nigeria (PDP and APC) cannot be overemphasized. For instance, Omojua (2015) contended that, the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) was the major beneficiary of the role of social media in political change. The All Progressives Congress (APC) greatly made massive political gain out of the social media. The party used different social media platforms to capitalize on the dwindling political fortunes of the then ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP). For instance, the then spokesman of the APC, Alhaji Lai Mohammed constantly used social media to mesmerize the Nigerian public on how the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) was not able to deal with the issue of insecurity, corruption and bad governance.

On the other hand, social media posts by the spokespersons of the then ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) such as Femi Fani-Kayode, Doyin Okupe and Reno Omokri attracted more enemies than friends for President Goodluck Jonathan. Omojuwa (2015) observed that, Doyin Okupe and Reno Omokri who were presidential aides on political matters and media respectively, wrote on their tweets accounts that: "retweet if you won't be voting president Jonathan because of Omokri and Okupe". The result from the Twitter poll showed that over 300 people retweeted that they would not be voting for President Goodluck Jonathan (Omojuwa, 2015). By employing this strange strategy, it showed the duo were unethical and had little or no idea of the ropes of the profession which brought serious damage to the re-election bid of former President Goodluck Jonathan. This was a clear indication of how the social media posts of presidential aides contributed in decimating the political balance sheet of the then President.

Both the ruling People's Democratic Party and the then opposition All Progressives Congress employed the use of social media as a major tool in electioneering campaign in Nigeria. The then opposition party, the APC benefited a lot from the social media usage. For example, Muhammadu Buhari, the Presidential candidate of the APC opened a Twitter account in December, 2014 with

900 tweets but as the 2015 general election drew nearer, he had over 117,000 followers (Omojuwa, 2015). Similarly, the twitter followers of his running mate Professor Yemi Osinbajo rose from 430 tweets to 80,000 (Omojuwa, 2015).

Comparatively, the twitter account of the then president Goodluck Jonathan had only 32 tweets with 25,000 followers (Omojuwa, 2015). Besides, the tweeter account of the then president was not functional as at May, 2014, a clear indication that there was a gap between the government and the people (Omojuwa, 2015). As observed by Polanski (2017), it would be a grave mistake to disregard the voices from the internet. This was what actually happened to the PDP in the 2015 elections. As a result, the APC greatly exploited this gap by convincing the Nigerian public to vote for change.

It was, therefore, surprising and contradictory that President Buhari who immensely benefited from social media influence to win the 2015 election, placed a ban on Twitter. From 5 June 2021 to 13 January 2022, the government of Nigeria officially banned Twitter, which restricted it from operating in the country. The ban occurred after Twitter deleted tweets made by, and temporarily suspended, the Nigerian president Muhammadu Buhari, warning the southeastern people of Nigeria, predominantly Igbo people, of a potential repeat of the 1967 Nigerian Civil War due to the insurgency in Southeastern Nigeria (Maclean, 2021).

Still in Nigeria, the emergence of Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP), prior to the 2023 elections, is another example of how social media can have enormous influence on politics. Flowing from the EndSars nationwide protests of 2020, youths of the nation began to agitate for a new Nigeria. Peter Obi, a former governor of Anambra State, who had just left the People's Democratic Party and joined the Labour Party (LP), became the beacon of hope for the youths, most of who were active on social media. The Obi campaign rapidly spread across the country via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and other platforms and indeed threatened the two major political parties, the ruling All Progressives Congress, APC and Peoples Democratic Party, PDP. Obadere (2023, p. 4) wrote on the Peter Obi phenomenon thus:

In the following months, the odds of Obi becoming Nigeria's next president changed, in a dramatic election season, from totally implausible to not unlikely to very possible, tracking the evolving mood of young people who felt at first that Obi stood no chance against the formidable machine of the old guard before becoming totally convinced that he stood as good a chance as any of disrupting the entrenched two-party system. It was the fervency and energy of these young people, the "Obi-dient" as they came to be known, that drove Obi's startling ascendancy, raising the hope that their candidate could overcome a series of formidable structural hurdles.

In Benue State, Nigeria, the victory of the governorship candidate of the All Progressives Congress, Reverend Father Hyacinth Alia, in the 2023 election, was largely attributed to the wave of campaign his team mounted on social media known as "Yes Father Movement". Alia's official Facebook page which was created less than two months before the election had over 30,000 followers, mostly young people. Though Father Alia's popularity, as a catholic priest who was known for conducting healing masses for about three decades was a key factor, his presence on social media also played a pivotal role in his victory at the polls (The Guardian Nigeria News, 2023).

The Liberian Case Study

In Liberia, civil society groups rose to caution the government against restricting access to social media before the country's elections of 2023. As the people of Liberia were preparing to vote on

October 10, 2023, two groups known as Access Now (2024) and the #KeepItOn coalition urged the then President, George Weah to ensure that the election process was inclusive, free, and fair — starting with upholding access to information and avenues for free expression via the internet.

When a government interferes with internet access during an election, it's the people who lose. Liberia's history of blocking social media during democratic movements must come to an end. #KeepItOn this election and beyond (Access Now, 2023, p.5).

In 2019, following anti-corruption protests against the government, Liberian authorities restricted access to popular social media platforms including X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and WhatsApp across the country, the civil society groups had issued a similar warning stating that:

Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition won't stop fighting until we put an end to internet shutdowns globally. This trend of shutting down information to control the narrative — in Africa and beyond — hurts democracy, endangers online expression, and attacks our right of freedom of association. No more shutdowns (Access Now, 2024, p.6)

The 2019 social media blackout in Liberia made it extremely difficult for journalists to report, access critical information, and share updates on the protests with the public. Internet shutdowns also cut people off from their loved ones, which can create uncertainty during political unrest. For example, in 2019, people in Liberia reported being unable to communicate with their relatives abroad during the shutdown (Access Now, 2023). Shutting down the internet during a crisis exacerbates existing tensions, spurs the spread of misinformation, and may even instigate or conceal violence and human rights violations perpetrated by both state and non-state actors.

During electoral periods, human rights defenders, election observers, civil society actors, and other stakeholders rely on the internet to monitor and report on elections, facilitating transparency and openness in the democratic process. Internet shutdowns make it difficult for citizens and stakeholders to participate in the electoral process (Access Now, 2023). Political candidates cannot engage with their supporters, and the documentation of electoral irregularities is impeded. This not only undermines civic engagement and electoral integrity; it also threatens human rights such as the right to freedom of expression and access to information.

The Chadian Case Study

Since July 22, 2020, the government of Chad has blocked access to WhatsApp, and up until August 18, 2020, authorities also cut access or slowed down the internet in parts of the country. Citing the need to prevent the spread of messages “inciting hate and division” on social media, government authorities reportedly took these drastic measures to prevent dissemination of a video and images, taken on July 14, 2020, showing a Chadian military officer opening fire on a mechanic who also attacked him with a knife during a dispute (Access Now, 2023). The implication of this ban on democracy could be expressed in the violation of fundamental rights of citizens of the country such as freedom of speech and expression. In Chad, the government lifted a 16-month social media ban in July 2019 thereby ending what was the longest social media blockade seen in any African country. The Chadian government argued that the lengthy ban was necessary for “security reasons” Dwyer and Molony, (2019). The Chadian case highlights the way social media has increasingly been framed as a threat, especially by authoritarian leaders. Since the beginning of 2019 at least nine other African countries have also experienced government ordered internet shutdowns. Dwyer and Molony went further that “Political leaders often view social media as a threat because it can provide the public with greater access to

information. It, also, has the potential to mobilize and challenge leadership. Some authors found ways in which digital platforms were creatively used to expand political participation.

The Case of Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe, Macmillan (2020) stated that during the 2018 elections, Twitter became a space where the physical violence prevalent in Zimbabwe's previous elections was enacted through discourse. It was also a space where opposition supporters challenged the hegemony of the ruling party and provided a space for political resistance.

The July 2018 Zimbabwe national elections were characterized by one unique feature: the extensive use of social media especially Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook, especially by the key presidential contenders Nelson Chamisa and Emmerson Mnangagwa in the struggle for hegemony. The cyber-contestation also became evident between Chamisa's followers nicknamed "Nerorists" and Mnangagwa's followers nicknamed "Varakashi" (Chibuwe, 2020, p. 12). Fake news and mudslinging became defining elements during these digital propaganda battles. Social media gained prominence in the election, its contribution to democracy is paradoxical. The anonymity and open nature of social media provides an opportunity for participation, but it is precisely this that is also its downside: it provides rooms for emergence of cyber ghosts. The space's invasion by cyber storm troopers and/or cyber ghosts and netizens serving elite interests undermined social media's liberative potential as it resulted in irrational debates, mudslinging, insults, and outright lies.

Arab Spring

The Arab Spring was a series of pro-democracy uprisings, protests, and revolutions that swept through the Arab world in 2010 and 2011. The movement was characterized by mass demonstrations, calls for political reform, and demands for greater social justice and economic opportunities. The Arab Spring had its roots in long-standing grievances against authoritarian regimes, corruption, economic inequality, and lack of political freedoms in many Arab countries. The spark that ignited the Arab Spring was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia, in December 2010. Bouazizi's act of protest against government corruption and repression resonated with many Tunisians and sparked widespread demonstrations and calls for President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to step down (Wolfsfeld, et al., 2013).

The 2011 Arab Spring upheavals showed how social media may have a revolutionary effect on modern international politics. People all around the Middle East and North Africa were mobilized to take part in large-scale rallies and demonstrations thanks, in large part, to social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. Social media was important in making the movement successful because it made it possible for information to be shared quickly and for protests to be organized. A new era of online activism and political involvement was ushered in by the Arab Spring, which demonstrated social media's capacity to oppose repressive governments and advance political change (Wolfsfeld, et al., 2013). The demonstrations were caused by high unemployment, food inflation, corruption, a lack of political freedoms (such as freedom of speech), and poor living conditions. There were series of protests and uprisings in late 2010 and early 2011 that challenged some of the Middle East and North Africa's entrenched dictatorships. Protesters demanding greater political rights, economic equality, and government accountability often faced violent repression by their countries' security forces. In December 2010 for instance protests began in central Tunisia against what the people described as corrupt and authoritarian government and quickly spread to the rest

of the country due to massive use of social media platforms. Protesters soon overwhelmed the capital, forcing the Tunisia President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to resign and flee in January 2011 (Sofi, 2019).

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement has emerged as a powerful force for social and political change in contemporary global politics, with social media playing a crucial role in its growth and impact in parts of the world including Africa. The movement began in July 2013, with the use of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on social media after the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting to death of an African-American teen, Trayvon Martin, 17 months earlier in February 2012. The movement returned to national headlines and gained further international attention during the global George Floyd protests in 2020 following his murder by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. An estimated 15 million to 26 million people participated in the 2020, Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, making it one of the largest movements in the country's history (Wikipedia, 2024). It comprised many views and a broad array of demands but they centered on criminal justice reform.

The popularity of Black Lives Matter has shifted over time. In 2023, about 51% of adults in the United States expressed their support for the movement, while in 2020 some 67% of Americans expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement (Statista, 2020). African countries like Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa also joined the global protests in response to the death of George Floyd and called for an end to police brutality in the USA. This again brought to bear, the power of social media.

The #BringBackOurGirls hashtag campaign was initiated by Nigerian activists to highlight the kidnapping of over 200 schoolgirls by Boko Haram in 2014. The First Lady, Michelle Obama, later tweeted the hashtag to garner support for the campaign. It was primarily driven by Nigerians and international supporters to raise awareness and press for action (Tufekci, 2017). The hashtag gained global traction, becoming a symbol of solidarity with the girls and their families, and a call to world leaders to secure their release. It sparked widespread outrage and condemned Boko Haram's actions, putting pressure on the Nigerian government and the international community to intensify efforts to bring the girls back safely. The campaign highlighted the broader issue of violence against women and children in conflict zones and served as a powerful tool for advocacy and mobilization, highlighting the need for concerted action to address the threat posed by extremist groups and prioritize the protection and empowerment of women and girls worldwide.

On the whole, the case studies of some African countries above underscore the undisputed impact of social media on contemporary politics in Africa and other parts of the world. While social media has played a key role in mobilizing citizens to demand political change (Shirky, 2011) and raise awareness about critical issues, it has also been used to spread misinformation, sow political polarization, and undermine democratic processes (Tufekci, 2017). The spread of misinformation and fake news has been particularly evident during political campaigns, where candidates or political parties can use social media to disseminate misleading or false information about their opponents or issues. This can have real-world consequences, such as swaying public opinion, suppressing voter turnout, or even influencing the outcome of elections (Baum, & Potter, 2019). Furthermore, the spread of misinformation and propaganda on social media can also contribute to the polarization of society. False information that reinforces existing beliefs and biases can create a sense of distrust and hostility towards those with differing

viewpoints, leading to an "us vs. them" mentality (Howard, et al., 2016). These examples highlight the complex and nuanced relationship between social media and politics, underscoring the need for greater regulation, transparency, and accountability in the digital sphere. Overall, these case studies provide valuable insights into the evolving influence of social media on the political landscape, offering important lessons for policymakers, activists, and citizens alike.

Challenges of Social Media in Democratization Process in Africa

There is no doubt that social media has become one of the major agencies of the democratization process across the world. However, there are many challenges facing social media as a democratisation tool. Ideas are the critical issues in a democracy and lack of cogent ideas mar the democratic process. One of the major limitations of social media as a democratization tool is that it disseminates mostly lopsided ideas. Therefore, without efficient communication of ideas, mobilization is ineffectual.

It is interesting to note that on one hand, while majority of social media users in Africa who criticize political developments are youths, on the other hand, most of these youths neither have voters' cards nor go out to cast their votes during elections. This is what Ihembe (2018) referred to as "twitterian and whatsapparian" generation. Though, the social media helped in sharing information which shape people's opinions and mobilizations, its limited access to people in the hinterlands and illiterate population require that, we must go out and mobilize people to participate in the political process. The effects of sharing information on social media without engaging the excluded population can be debilitating on our democracy. This is because all activities start with being informed; next is conviction; and ultimately for some, direct involvement in rallies and sometimes direct confrontation with authority. Therefore, the consequence of not involving all and sundry, can best be compared to Montesquieu (1748) view that the tyranny of a prince in an oligarchy is not as dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of the citizens in a democracy. Sharing ideas on social media without actually engaging in the process is an exercise in futility.

To further buttress the above argument, the Independent National Electoral Commission in 2019, stated that there were 11,228,582 million uncollected voters' cards in its custody as at 20th February, 2019 (Channels Television, 2019). Change cannot be effected online but through the ballot box. The implication of this is that, if the people disparage or malign each other on the social media without actually coming out to vote or mobilise others to do so, the change they desire to make may end up being a mirage. Even the collection of voters cards can be enhanced by social media messages.

The spate of fake news and hate speech on social media on political events is also a serious threat to the democratization process. The proliferation of fake news and hate speech on social media is a significant issue in Nigeria, as it can lead to violence, societal divisions, and undermine trust in institutions, a concern prevalent in many other nations. One instance of fake news in Nigeria was that of Lauretta Onochie, a media aide to President Buhari, who was accused of sharing fake news on social media. She posted a new road which she claimed was constructed by President Buhari. It turned out that the road was actually a picture from Rwanda. Ms Onochie later apologized on her Twitter account saying "My big mistake, apologies to all, friends and wailers alike. It won't happen again" (CNN, 2019). She also shared on her Twitter handle, photos of a rally by the Presidential candidate of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Alhaji Atiku Abubakar sharing food packs with money bearing the caption "Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts- Atiku in Sokoto yesterday," (CNN, 2019). It turned out that this was another fake news.

The then Minister of Defence, Mansur-Dan Ali conceded that fake news was a serious problem in Nigeria by stating that the Federal Government planned to monitor social media accounts of prominent Nigerians to contain “the propagation of hate speeches” (Wakili, 2018). Many Nigerians criticized the move and alleged that it was a plan to gag people's freedom. It also became curious to note that the All Progressives Congress (APC) that made massive political gains out of social media usage during the 2015 general election would turn around to gag the social media community in Nigeria. The All Progressives Congress (APC) wanted to prevent the transmission of false statements or declaration of facts in Nigeria as well as end the financing of online mediums that transmit false statements.

Equally important is the demarcation line between hate speech and constructive criticism. Hate speech is any speech that has the intent of denigrating, repressing, harassing and causing the death of a person or group of persons on the basis of tribal affiliation, sex, religion or ethnic group. For instance, the hate speech expressed by Oba Akiolu of Lagos:

On Saturday, if anyone of you, I swear in the name of God, goes against my wish that Ambode will be the next governor of Lagos state, the person is going to die inside this water ... For the Igbos and others in Lagos, they should go where the Oba of Lagos heads to (Godwin 2015, p.1).

This is because many political leaders in Africa term constructive criticism as hate speech in order to deter people from bringing into limelight the inadequacies of the government in power to public knowledge.

The problem of unequal access to the internet also limits the role of social media as a democratization tool. This is what technology experts call “Digital Divide”. Mehra (2004) defined the term 'Digital Divide' as “the troubling gap between those who use computers and the internet and those who do not”. The divide is associated with several factors but majorly, the issue of digital divide is linked to illiteracy, income and poor telecommunication facilities. In many less industrialized economies, low literacy rates limit the usage of internet services users.

Poverty is another major factor limiting access to the use of social media in Africa. According to Statista (2023), in 2022, the extreme poverty rate in Africa stood at around 50 percent among the rural population, compared to 10 percent in urban areas. Together with poverty, malnutrition is also widespread in Africa. Limited access to food leads to low health conditions, increasing the poverty. The Brooking Institution reported that 87 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty and that six people fall below poverty line after every six minutes (Vanguard Newspaper, 2018). How can such a huge population who are struggling to survival be able to afford data for social media? In addition, despite the fact that Nigeria has the biggest market in Africa in the telecommunication industry, the cost of data is still out of reach of many people. The poor state of telecommunication infrastructures in Africa has also not helped matters. Poor network is the leading problem associated with the infrastructure.

Conclusion

The impact of social media on politics in Africa is significant and multifaceted. It has transformed political communication, mobilization, and engagement, providing a platform for citizens to voice their opinions and hold their leaders accountable. Social media has also been instrumental in facilitating political movements and protests, leading to both positive and negative outcomes. It has influenced election campaigns and the dissemination of political information, contributing to both transparency and misinformation. Overall, the influence of social media on politics in

Africa cannot be understated, and it continues to shape the political landscape on the continent.

Recommendations

- i. Governments and relevant authorities in Africa should establish clear regulations and oversight mechanisms to ensure responsible use of social media in political contexts, while also safeguarding freedom of expression.
- ii. Efforts should be made by African governments to expand the school curriculum to media literacy to equip the people with the ability to apply critical thinking skills and evaluate political information as well as news shared on social media by political actors and their supporters.

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