Digital Media and the Participation of Rural Dwellers in Politics - A Case Study of Central Senatorial District in Cross River State - Nigeria

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Abstract

This study focuses on digital media and the participation of rural dwellers in politics. The emergence of digital media has largely challenged what used to be the hegemony of traditional media. It has also been responsible for the now increased participation of rural dwellers in politics. The current study tried to establish this relationship between the emergence of digital media and increased participation of rural dwellers in politics. While doing this, the study makes use of the Public Sphere Theory as its theoretical framework and in the version propounded by the German Scholar, Jurgen Habermas in 1962. The relevance of the theory to this work is that it seeks to explain how members of the public become active participants in the political life. A survey design was adopted which elicited data from 190 respondents, cutting across three rural settlements in the Central Senatorial Districts of Cross River State, Nigeria. The purposive sampling technique was employed, and the findings suggested that there is a phenomenal rise in political participation among rural dwellers following the advent of digital media. This has, in the view of this study, given birth to a new political culture, "Rural participants' political culture", (RPPC). Consequent upon this, the study recommended the continuous engagement of digital media in the entire body of the nation's politics.

Key words: Digital media, rural dwellers, political participation.

Background of the Study

The traditional mass media previously relied upon by the press and by broadcasters was, before now widely seen as beneficial (even inseparably necessary) for the conduct of democratic politics and other processes in the society. The benefits of pre-digital media era stemmed from, in the view of McQuail (2008, p. 150), the flow of information about public events to all citizens and the exposure of politicians and governments functionaries to public gazes and critiques. However, continued McQuail, the negative effects were perceived, because of the dominance of channels by a few voices, from a preponderance of a 'vertical flow' and a heightened commercialization of the media market, leading to the neglect of democratic roles. In the same vein, Hasan (2013, p. 640) has opined that "some consider the concentration of media ownership to be a grave threat to democracy" instead of being a boost to the society and to rural dwellers

The advent of electronic or digital media writes McQuail, have been widely hailed as a potential way of escape from the oppressive 'top-down' politics of mass democracies in which tightly organized political parties make policy unilaterally and mobilize support behind them with minimal negotiation and grass-roots input.The new media, has taken over the globe by storm as the youth, adults and professionals have embraced it as a daily routine. Media and communication scholars, political scientists, sociologists and international relations scholars have conducted hundreds of studies on various aspects of social media usage (Golan, Arceneaux, and Soule, 2019). According to Ahmad, Alvi and Ittefaq (2019), "the Internet is playing a significant role in providing information to the public on political events, engaging its users and encouraging them to get involved in offline political activities". New media promises new forums for the development of interest groups and formation of opinion. Coleman (1999) points out, they allow dialogue to take place between politicians and active citizens. "The role of the new media continued Coleman, is in the subversive service of free expression under conditions of authoritarian control of the means of communication".

Unlike it early beginnings, new media and technology have changed communication patterns in a two-way communication (Emruli and Beca, 2011). Telecom operators make access to the Internet increasing easy. For vast-majority of Nigerian youth, reports The Press (2012, p.31), these have become fashionable - the trend is increasing as more and more young people and even the elderly are enmeshed in the net. Online activities related to politics are useful and encourages youth to participate in political events, (Quinteller & Vissers, 2008). Internet and social media have become increasingly important for disseminating political information (McAllister, 2019).

The Internet encourages its users toward politics and strengthens offline political participation which shows the dual effect of Internet on information and participation toward politics (Nam, 2012). The 'new media' can be identified as recent technologies such as pagers, cellular phones, satellites, computers, electronic mail and the Internet are not only popular in the first and second worlds, but also among users in the third and fourth worlds. As this study will show, the rural people use new media for political information such as sharing opinions and discussing issues around politics with fellow community members. How engaging has been the new media especially the cell phone among rural dwellers in the nation's body polity? This is the subject of our enquiry.

Literature review
New Media and Political Participation
Social and new media are the latest phenomenon in Information Communication Technology (ICT) and have revolutionized communication, as well as, enhanced political participation by the electorates. Youth who are active in politics have embraced it, serving as an easier, faster and more liberal source of information devoid of the usual internal and external control of the conventional media.
Schulz's (2005) study suggested that new media users are active in politics and political discourse. The internet has developed the interests toward politics of its users and improved political efficacy of the respondents which create their online and offline political participation. Jiang (2016) examined the effects of the Internet on

online and offline political participation. He also investigated the Internet's role in molding citizen's perception of politics. This strong relationship creates political efficacy and election interest among Internet users and increases their political involvement (Jiang, 2016). The use of the Internet has become the main source of political efficacy and political participation, enhancing awareness about voting and campaigning. New media also increases the ratio of voter's turnout among users. It develops the approach which helps in voting (Larson, 2004). Users' efficacy helps them to understand the political affairs in a better way through the acquisition of political information from new media.

Kahne, Middaugh and Alley (2014) investigated the youth, new media, and the rise of participatory politics and concluded that new media has given a platform to individuals for information and communication with large audiences and a means to participate in political activities. Finding a gap in literature, this study sheds light on the use of the new media especially, the cell phone by rural dwellers and the effect it has on their participation in politics. Previous studies have investigated the role of social and new media in all spheres of life, but not how the cell phone has increased participation in politics - a study of the Central Senatorial District, Cross River State, Nigeria.

Political Information and the Communicative value of the cellphone
Political information is a big business in a political system. Udoakah (1998) considers it as an "investment where both government and political parties trade on political information: Like in the rural areas, political information is conducted orally but vertically downward and informal. The audience for political information in the rural setting is majorly the poor and illiterates. The channels of political information in the rural settlements include such channels as the family, interest groups, political party activists, government agencies and opinion leaders. With all these channels political political information was still seen as a one way process because the rural electorates depended on either of the listed channels for political information. So, they only act on the information provided for them. The dissemination of knowledge or political information is made to follow vertical lines –

that is, too come from, (in the case of the rural areas), opinion leaders. What the rural people are to do in the course of participating in politics, is governed by decisions and instructions issued by the opinion leaders. That is to say, the rural people accept hook, line and sinker political information without using their own critical faculties since the media of communication available does not encourage a two way dialogue.Today, the emergence of digital media, with the cellphone as s medium, has changed the landscape of the transmission of political information. It has not only encourage participatory rural politics but interactive/dialogue between rural people and party activists, or between the government and the governed.

Indeed the new political culture, as evident in the rural areas is that the cellphone has not only encouraged political participation through quality discourse but has also created an enlightened voting behaviour and favourable attitude to the electoral process as a whole. Interestingly, the cellphone through interactions with party activists and government, has encouraged community mobilization and promoted grass-roots democracy.

Theoretical Framework
This discourse is anchored on the Public Sphere Theory, as propounded by a German Scholar, Jurgen Habermas in 1962. Habermas directs attention to the historical evolution of the press. It is not the interest of this paper to offer any elaborate analysis or critique of the theory but we will look at its requirements and underlying principles. The Public Sphere open forum for public debate. Access to the space is free and freedom of association and assembly is guaranteed, (Garnham, 1986, McQuail, 2010). The basic principles underlying the constitution and functioning of the public sphere include, "general accessibility especially to information, the elimination of privilege and the search for general norms and their rational legitimation" (Garnham, P. 42).

Craig Calhoun has also pointed out that a public sphere that is adequate for a democratic polity must meet two requirements:

quality of discourse and quality of participation, (Calhoun, 1982). These two requirements, in the view of Schudson, (1992), is not just that people must participate but the quality of such participation and involvement is also crucial. It is on the basis of this that Habermas' theory stresses the importance of rational - critical discourse in the public sphere. Habermas' main concern about the importance of these principles is with undistorted communication (Garnham, P.42). In our context, we appreciate the emergence of the new media since it has provided a potential way of escape from the earlier mass media of press and broadcast. As Atala and Umar (2005/2006) noted; mobile phone communication is one of the fastest, as it can increase the quality of political discourse and quality of political participation among the electorates.

Methodology

The researcher adopted the survey in the investigation. The population of the study was rural dwellers, made up of males and females, in three villages of Central Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria. The villages are Assiga in Yakurr, Abijang in Ikom and Ovonom in Obubra. The questionnaire was used to gather data. It was administered on 200 rural dwellers out of 950 eligible voters (INEC, 2019) that took part in the 2019 gubernatorial election in these three villages. The population of each village selected was done using purposive random sampling technique. Of the 200 copies of the questionnaire administered, 190 copies were fully completed and returned; ten (10) copies were either poorly completed or not returned. Data were collated and presented in tables, yielding related percentages.

Presentation of Data
Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to villages

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Assiga (Yakurr)	70	37.000
Abijang (Ikom)	80	42.000

Ovonom (Obubra)	40	21.000
Total	190	100

Survey's field work, 2019

Table 1: shows the distribution of the questionnaire according to villages. The return rate of the questionnaire in Assiga village was 70, representing 37.0% that of Abijang was 80, representing 42.0% and Ovonom was 40, representing 21.0%. The figure showing uneven distribution of figures does not reflect voting strength but rather questionnaire that were duly filled and returned by respondents in each of the villages.

Table 2: Percentage of Respondents Based on Sex

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Male	84	44.0
Female	106	56.0
Total	190	100

Survey's field work, 2019

Table 2: gives a summary of the gender distribution of the respondents. There is a difference between the two groups of voters. The female respondents out-numbered their male counterpart. The female respondents were 106, representing 56.0%, while the male respondents constituted 84, representing 44.0%. The difference suggests that more females came out to vote in the gubernatorial election in those polling booths.

Table 3: Percentage of Respondents by Age

Variable	Male = 84		Female = 106	
	Frequent	Percent	Frequent	Percent
18-29	60	71.5	65	61.0

| 30-40 | 24 | 28.5 | 41 | 39.00 |
| Total | 84 | 100 | 106 | 100 |

Survey fieldwork, 2019

Table 3: The respondents were categorized into two levels of age distribution. There were those between 18-29 years old males constituted 60, representing 71.5%, and (male) respondents between 30 - 40 years old constituted 24, representing 28.5%. On the other hand, the female respondents between 18-29 were 65, representing 61.0% and others who were 30 - 40 years old constituted 41, representing 39.0%. The age group constituted one of the variables to find out if the youth are active politically in the rural areas.

Table 4: Percentage of Respondents Educational level

Variable	Gender			
Educational Qualification	Male = 84		Female = 106	
	Frequent	Percent	Frequent	Percent
FSLC	30	35.72	40	38.0
WASC/SSSC	35	41.66	50	47.0
Tertiary	19	22.62	16	15.0
Total	84	100	106	100

Survey fieldwork, 2019

The use of educational level was to find out if the cell phone is based on one's academic knowledge. The respondents' level of education was classified into three major groups, Viz: First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) - male constituted 30, representing 35.72%, the female constituted 40, representing 38.0%. A second group holds the West African School Certificate, (WASC) or the Senior Secondary School Certificate (SSSC), constituted - male 35, representing 41.66% and females 50, representing 47.00%. In addition, those at the tertiary

level comprised male 19, representing 22.62% and the females 16, representing 15.0%. Again, the use of educational level was to determine whether any special knowledge is required to use the cell phone, in the sharing of political information.

Table 5: Distribution of respondents on "Which of the new media technologies is mostly engaged during political activities in the rural areas"

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Cell phone	180	95.0
Computers	-	
Electronic mail	-	
Internet	10	5.0
Pagers	-	
Satellite	-	
Total	190	100

Survey's field work, 2019

Table 5: suggests that rural dwellers that use cell phone during elections constitute 180, representing 95.0%, while a few who use Internet constitute 10, representing 5.0%. All other new media technologies listed above are not engaged during elections in these rural areas

Table 6: Distribution of respondents on "What function is performed by the new media especially cell phone, during elections in Nigeria"

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Surveillance	90	47.0
Observation & eye witness account	100	530
Total	190	100

Survey's field work, 2019

According to table 6, respondents view on the function of the cell phone relating to surveillance constituted 90, representing 47.0%, while these other respondents who use the cell phone for observation and eye witness report constituted 100, representing 53.0%.

Table 7: Distribution of respondents on whether the function performed by the new media has engendered rural dwellers confidence in politics.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	180	94.7
No	10	5.3
Total	190	100

Survey's field work, 2019

Table 7 clearly shows that the new media function during elections in Nigeria has engendered confidence on the rural electorate as 180, representing 94.7% agreed or said 'yes', while an insignificant few constituting 10, representing 5.3% did not share in this view.

Discussion of Findings

The percentage respondents on table 5, 95.0% reveal that the cell phone is mostly used during political activities, since according to them it requires no educational knowledge or technical know-how to use it. Both literate and the illiterate can operate a cell phone. Still on the use of the new media during political activities, 5.0% engage the Internet, while other media technologies like computers, electronic mail, pagers, and satellite are not put into use by the rural dweller during political activities. This view is in line with Coleman (1999) who asserted that new media promises new forums for the development of interest groups and formation of opinion and allow dialogue to take place between politicians and active citizens. In addition, the views of the respondents in the use of the cell phone in the political process has facilitated people-to-people interactions across political units, wards and constituencies thereby, enhancing exchanges of

knowledge, ideas and information in the political discourses and processes.

Table 6, 47.0% and 53.0% of the respondents feel that the cellphone is playing the function of surveillance and eye witness account. This has helped, in the view of the respondents to foster responsible behavior.

Table 7, distribution percentage of respondents showed that 94.7% strongly feel that the functions performed by the new media in the political process have engendered rural dwellers confidence in the process. Though, according to them, the process is not completely free from hiccups but most political misconducts are becoming a thing of the past. However, 5.3% of the respondents do not share in this view. They rightly argued, pointing at the instances where despite the functions played by the new media, cases or incidences of false declaration and publication of election results are noticeable in the Independence Electoral Commission offices, even when the cell phone users have captured the actual result.

Summary

The research set out to examine the "new media and the participation of rural dwellers in politics". According to the data generated and analyzed, a good percentage of rural dwellers engaged the new media especially the cell phone, during any of the political processes. The study also revealed that the new media performs two vital functions in the political process: surveillance and eye witness account. This, according to the study has reduced greatly incidences of electoral misconduct.

Equally important in this work is that the functions of the new media in the electoral process have engendered rural dweller participation in politics. The engagement of digital media in the political process has indeed given birth to a political culture in the rural areas: providing quality of political discourse and quality of political participation thereby creating an enlightened voting behaviour and favourable attitudes to the electoral process as a whole. Very important also, is

that the cell phone has encourage community mobilization and promoted grassroot democracy.

Conclusion

Credible elections require the active participation of the citizens in the process. The level of this participation is completely hinged on the confidence the electorates reposed on the electoral system. Well, unlike the traditional media, the new media has permitted public comments, opinions, discussion and criticisms, during electioneering periods. This has engendered public discuss and debates and exchanges of ideas among the electorates.

Electorates, now involved in politics, investigate and expose political issues that may undermine the freeness, fairness and credibility of elections, using the cellular phone and other social media platforms. Today, images of electoral misconduct: use of physical force, coercion, thuggery, vanguard group, among others has been jettisoned, as such can be captured instantly for public view.

The growing Internet access across the country and the availability of a variety of mobile and web-based devices for information gathering, storage and instantaneous delivery on a mass scale offer new possibilities for the citizens to effectively participate in politics.

Like in other climes, the rural dwellers of the Central Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria depend on the cell phone mostly, compared with other social media platforms. The majority of the survey respondents in this work participate in politics via the cell phone, changing their longed established negative impression about politics.

Recommendations

The importance of the new media in the political process cannot be overemphasized; as clearly seen in this work. Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations have been suggested to include:

1. There should be continuous engagement of the new media in the political process.

2. The Independence Electoral Commission (INEC) should refrain from stopping the   electorate from bringing cell phones to the scene of elections, as it acts as a check on the perpetrators of electoral fraud.
3. Any recording of electoral misconduct using the cell phone can be used as evidence in any competent court of law hence, should be allowed around polling booths.

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