

**NEW MEDIA AS THEATRE STAGE FOR POLITICAL EDUCATION: A
STUDY OF SELECTED NEW MEDIA SKITS ON THE 2023 NIGERIAN
GENERAL ELECTIONS**

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Abstract

Many factors, primary among which are leadership failures, led to some level of apathy among the electorate in past elections in Nigeria. A report claims that only 35.66% of the Nigerian electorate participated in the 2019 general elections. The situation was envisaged to get worse in the 2023 elections owing to obvious socio-political realities in the country. Various media were, therefore, employed to salvage the situation through conscious and unconscious political agitations. Hence, during the 2023 Nigerian general elections campaigns, the services of the theatre in political conscientization through the dissemination of video skits and short films through the new media especially, YouTube and WhatsApp were sought. The attention of the public was drawn to an avalanche of citizenship rights and political education as well as relevant information aimed at guiding the citizenry in taking the right actions for the betterment of the country. This article interrogates the role of the theatre in creating citizenship rights' education via the new media during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Adopting the Technological Determinism Theory (TDT), the study uses content analysis and direct observation methods to examine selected recorded performances disseminated via the new media during the buildup for the 2023 general elections. A total of five video skits shared via the new media were analysed. Based on the analysis of the selected video skits, the study surmised that the Nigerian populace may have garnered some wealth of knowledge bordering on electoral consciousness, candidate's leadership qualities and general voters' education. The paper concludes that theatre as a vehicle of instruction engaged in creating social awareness that enhance citizenship responsiveness sought to facilitate the democratic process for good leadership in the 2023 Nigerian general elections.

Keywords: Drama skits, New media, Political agitation, Short films, TDT, Theatre.

Introduction

Indisputably, the theatre is a valuable weapon in the 'fort' of change. The theatre is used as a metaphor for change as well as to challenge, provoke and engage the audience to take certain positive actions. Quoting the Theatre Union Manifesto, Thornton claims that "theatre must face up to the problems of its time; it cannot ignore the poverty and suffering which increases every day. It cannot with sincerity, close its eyes to the disasters of its time" (1). Theatre employs such tools as visceral images, metaphors, real human environments and actions, larger-than-life props and costumes, cultural

elements that the audience can identify with, as well as the opportunity for empathy and/or distancing to communicate messages to people.

One aspect of human life that the theatre has continually touched is the area of governance. In its long history, the theatre has been involved in the workings of governance by offering safe ways of ‘talking back to power’ and providing spaces to challenge received wisdom. This is applied to democratic governance to serve the purpose of this paper. The theatre has also told stories that represent the depth and breadth of communities and their leadership. This it has successfully done by adopting and adapting to various forms which it has continued to morph with emerging technologies that create platforms for its sustainability. In recent times, the social media theatre stage has emerged. It is powered by the new media. To some extent, the social media theatre stage is devoid of the spatial limitations of the physical theatre. According to Akoh and Ugwu, “the emergence of the social media has indubitably altered the Nigerian theatre space. The social media stage has created a niche for individuals to somewhat independently practice theatre” (14). This, arguably, makes the theatre available to service virtually all aspects of the polity via the new media.

The digital technology has birthed the new online theatre platforms with their attendant gains and losses to theatre practice. Through the new media, the Nigerian populace, for instance, became more aware of the happenings in their sociopolitical and sociocultural ecosystems. Consequently, the Nigerian masses have become conscious of their environment, and as such, have developed tough skin and survival gimmicks to either ignore the political leaders when they are failing while struggling for daily bread or engage the government in one form of agitation or another. The latter option has become more prominent and was made manifest in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria. Hence, one of the most active tools of engagement during the 2023 general election was the social media theatre that artists engaged for the purposes of conscientization and civic rights awareness creation.

Theoretical Scaffolding

This study adopts the Technological Determinism Theory (TDT) to underscore its argument that the new media is an emergent theatre stage for political education. Hauer asserts that technological determinism is the belief that technology is the principal initiator of the society’s transformation. The emergence of this theory is usually attributed to the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen, who formulated the causal link between the technology and the society. According to the supporters of technological determinism, any social changes are controlled by the technology, technological development, communications technology and media. The modern information society arises as a result of the development of innovations, new technologies and their social and political implications(1).

The proponents of the Technological Determinism Theory (TDT) are of the view that the society is usually influenced and shaped by technological developments. Society hardly has any choice but to adjust and adapt to new technologies and innovations and their usage. Technology is here could be seen as a determinant of changes that have meaningful impact on all aspects of human life and living. TDT

denotes an approach that promote the thesis that educational technology is influenced both by the users and their surroundings, and above all, by the technology itself. Technologies are said not to be neutral to the learning process. Rather, it structures information in a manner typical of them. Yet, the negative consequences of technological development are seen as the result of poor use by the people, and not necessarily a result of the very nature of technology.

Small Media, Social Media and New Media in the Nigerian Election Space

It should be pointed out *ab initio* that “variations exist in the use of terms, describing the new technologies that revolutionized the processes of information gathering and dissemination” (Auwal 29). Such terms as social network, internet community, social website, social platform, forum and chatroom have been used by different scholars at different times. The concept of social media in Nigeria is linked to mediums of social interactions that allow people to have personal interactions with others using their phones or laptops (Omoera and Guanah 8-9). With over thirty million social media users in Nigeria, and the rising profile of social media influencers, one can argue that social media has made a positive impact by way of changing the ‘face’ and concept of politics in Nigeria. Actors/influencers and users access the social media more freely than is the case with the physical theatre or orthodox media. The speed of communication and exchange, the cyber community it can create, the interactive nature and options for exchange of various forms of communication as well as its believability cannot but be applauded.

According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), as of "December 2022, the number of active mobile subscribers in the country reached 222.57 million, while internet subscribers exceeded 154.8 million" (*Africanews* par.1). While we note that social media users are part of the electorate, data from the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) "shows that the number of active social media users in Nigeria has risen from 27 million in 2019, to 36 million" (CDD par.2). Owing to this, one may be right to attribute the new dimension in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria to social media influence. It is pertinent to note, however, that: "...these networks for the flow of information can also promote democracy. Civic awareness of the continuous voters' registration process and the importance of participating has largely been driven by a sustained online campaign in the run-up to 2023" (CDD par.1). Again, the social media platforms served as a medium to fact-check political leaders and those aspiring to official positions in the struggle for deepening democracy; to ensure good governance and peaceful co-existence.

‘New media’ is used to refer to “a 21st century catchall term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images and sound” (Bailey Socha and Barbara Eber-Schmid cited in Ebekue 96). This definition of the new media is not all encompassing. To Agboola, new media is essentially a cyber-culture with modern computer technology, digital data controlled by software and the latest fast developing communication technology. Most technologies described as “*new media*” are digital, and often have characteristics of being networkable, dense, compressible, interactive and impartial (105). Agboola’s view here throws more light

on some of the characteristics of the new media. Auwal adds that: “new media can be described as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of the World Wide Web (WWW) and that allows the creation and exchange of user generated contents” (29). Auwal’s submission speaks to the possibility of the creation and exchange of digitally generated content (texts, pictures, audios and videos), which is an exciting component of the new media. Furthermore, Asemah describes the new media as a broad term that recently emerged “to encompass the amalgamation of traditional media such as film, images, music, spoken and written words, with the interactive power of computer and communications technology, computer-enabled consumer devices and most importantly, the Internet” (30).

Owing to the exciting characteristics of the new media, the youths have become its biggest fans. Of course, “the Nigerian National Youth Policy of 2009 defined a youth as a person between the ages of 15-35” (Abraham 275). To the youths, the new media provides easy means of getting information from their internet-based terminals or handheld devices that provide them their choice information at anytime and anywhere as long as there is internet connection. The media under the new media adopt the small media techniques in their operations bringing in elements of guerrilla theatre and poor theatre, usually impromptu, and make use of minimum actors, props, scenery, costume and makeup. The term small media is used to refer to the alternative, experimental media that have their production, marketing and/or distribution patterns usually not in line with or affiliated to the orthodox major media outfits that are majorly under government control (Serberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1-2). To Brian Larkin, the small media refers to “technologies such as video and audio cassettes, photocopiers, faxes and computers, which differ from the older big mass media of cinema and television and radio stations” (110). He further explains that other non-electronic forms of media production such as stickers, slogans and arts that decorate taxis, buses and motorbikes are part of the small media concept (124). In this regard, Ihentuge asserts that:

The orthodox media, are seen as elitist and belonging to a certain class in the society-the bourgeoisie. Their ownership, affordability, accessibility, language use and participation as well as their location in time and space, at least in their earliest stages, was far from the masses. But the small media facilitates the rise of new, radical, cheap and accessible communicative spaces. It creates possibilities for local media production and consumption. Small media are more decentralized in ownership structure. (149)

The accessibility of the small media provides an alternative media for those eager to express themselves “This makes them more like unofficial forms of popular culture, from rumours to jokes and mimicry, in that they create cultural and political spaces of communication that are outside of the control of the State and corporations” (Larkin 111). Discussing further on the ability of the masses to access the mainstream media in Nigeria, Isekhure affirms that “access for Nigerians to the electronic media is limited, especially in the rural areas, as the country suffers from a severe shortage of electricity with frequent power failure” (226). At any rate, Agboola points out that

in the recent years, fast developing technology has been fuelling an information revolution. The new media, digital broadcasting and the internet are sweeping away the limitations of the analogue world and weakening the grip of government-owned platforms. The nature of the relationship between the broadcaster and its audience is changing. New media in this information age provides an immediate, informative, intelligent, interactive platform for discussion and debate (105). The new media theatre usually adopts a combination of the guerilla and poor theatre approaches characteristic of the small media. These views affirm the use of the new media, especially the social media, as newly found theatre stage.

Analysis of Selected New Media Skits on the 2023 Nigeria General Elections

Asemah asserts that information and communication technology, exemplified by the new media, has brought about “a fundamental shift on human society and created profound change in the way we live, work or play” (271). Nigeria is one of the countries where Asemah’s assertion holds water. It has been said that Nigeria as a country has about 32.9 active social media users, a greater per cent of which are youths. The implication is that many Nigerians have tapped into the various social media platforms. During the build-up for the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, the electoral body in Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), consistently assured Nigerians and the international community of free, fair and credible elections in the 2023 national elections. The electoral body assured Nigerians that their votes will count as the sole determinant of the outcome of the elections as technology will be deployed to ensure proper result management. This gladdened the hearts of the people and many set to work. Film was then put to the services of the electoral process mainly by independent creative artists and theatre practitioners. This was seen more in the area of voter education. There is an avalanche of video skits produced, disseminated and consumed during the 2023 general election in Nigeria via the social media. But a few will suffice here for analysis.

Election Campaign in Nigeria

The video skit titled *Election Campaign in Nigeria* was produced by Real House of Comedy. It was shared mainly on YouTube and WhatsApp. This skit presents two scenes. In the first scene tagged as “happening elsewhere”, a political candidate is seen with a group of youths as he sells his candidature to them. He is able to discuss issues that he will tackle if elected and policies he will bring to improve the conditions of the populace. The youths he addressed were able to buy his ideas and hail him as the one whose candidature they will endorse. In the second scene, a situation is presented and tagged as “happening in Nigerian politics.” In it, a political godfather presents his ‘anointed’ candidate to be to the people. Rather than try to convince the people to accept him based on his proposed action plans, he starts running down the personality of the opponent calling him all manners of names. At the end, he distributes an item that looks like a roll of toilet paper to the people telling them how the item was bought from the United States of America (USA) and taken to Dubai and Italy before bringing

it back to Nigeria. The people are made to snap photograph with the godfather and his anointed candidate- displaying the gift item.

This skit attempts an exposé of the issue of what the electorate should look out for in the campaigns of the political candidates. It admonishes the candidates to go for issue-based campaigns which should be driven by well packaged action plans. This, of course, should be devoid of the irresponsible, reckless and inflammatory rhetoric of the past elections. It may be right to assert that finding solutions to state problems start with sound political campaigns. At campaigns, candidates come to seek the voices, the votes and the mandates of the electorate and should, thus, not be a time for some mean fight with opponents or disrespect to the viewpoints of others. This informs the idea of political debates by candidates. Unfortunately, many political candidates in Nigeria blatantly shy away from political debates.

Nigerian Politicians during Election Campaigns

Another skit titled *Nigerian Politicians during Election Campaigns* is also produced by Real House Comedy and shared majorly on YouTube and WhatsApp. In the drama skit, a character labelled ‘President’ goes round the community falsely helping people do their work telling them “There is no need labouring yourself. Just vote for me and I will help you.” The skit shows him as he collects the cutlass from a labourer cutting grasses to help him cut the grasses. He is also seen helping someone carrying a generating set to carry the set as well as help a sachet water hawker to hawk his ware. With these, the people hail him as the Godsent messiah and assure him of their votes. Soon, he is shown as winning the election and things change for the worse. As he is shown alighting from a vehicle, the young man he helped cut grasses comes to hail him as president only to receive a thunderous slap from him. At this point, other characters tagged ‘Poverty’, ‘Garri and Groundnut’, ‘Unemployment’, ‘Insecurity’ and ‘Debt’ come to embrace the young man as one of their own. This skit shares similarity with the one below. Hence, the two will be discussed together.

Nigerian Old Politicians Election Strategy

This skit has similar story line with the one above – *Nigerian Politicians during Election Campaigns*. *Nigerian Old Politicians Election Strategy* is produced by Thespian Nozy Production and distributed on WhatsApp and YouTube. In it, the character tagged Nigerian Politician helps another character sweep, feed, and even ‘take care of a girlfriend’ before election only to change after election slapping anyone who attempts to come close to him. The storylines in the two skits above (*Nigerian Politicians during Election Campaigns* and *Nigerian Old Politicians Election Strategy*) are what one witnesses in Nigeria during elections when hitherto unapproachable politicians suddenly descend from their high horses to the level of the common man on the streets. As elections approach in Nigeria, politicians boarding motorcycles or buying local foods like roasted corn, yam, and plantain by the roadside becomes common sight. For instance, a report written by Tola Owoyele and published on 14 February 2022 with the title ‘Politicians are Back with Gimmicks Ahead of 2023: Here are the Top 5 Yet’ reads thus in part:

Nigerians have seen Orji Uzor Kalu and Adams Oshiomhole, former governors of Abia and Edo States respectively, buying and eating corn by the roadside... Rochas Okorocha, former governor of Imo State, once helped a woman roast corn with one hand while carrying her child with the other, his entourage taking pictures of every moment. Also, Dino Melaye, a former Senator, posed for the camera with a tray of boiled groundnuts on his head.

The report went on to name many other Nigerian politicians with this gimmick in the 2023 general elections in Nigeria including, Governor Abdullahi Ganduje of Kano State, Dele Momodu, Governor Seyi Makinde of Oyo State, and Vice-President Yemi Osinbajo. In another report, the Governor of Lagos State is captured as behaving like the politicians in the above skits immediately after the presidential elections. Note that the candidate of the opposition party won in Lagos State. This accounts for why the governorship candidate of the ruling party started behaving like the politicians in the skits. A story on JKyno Blog is captioned “Sanwo-Olu turns Phone Repairer, Evangelist, Usher, all in One Week.” Part of the story reads thus: unny enough, Sanwo-Olu has gone back to archaic politics and campaign strategy which... has completely demystified and abolished... Sanwo-Olu has been going round Lagos licking Ice Cream in a public mall, going to churches to dance, standing at entrance to work as ushers (sic) and most recently, in a phone repairer’s shop.

The video skits *Nigerian Politicians during Election Campaigns* and *Nigerian Old Politicians Election Strategy* above succinctly capture the political scenarios above and warn the electorate to beware of the political stratagems. There is also the video skit (a solo performance) of one character named Young Elder GCFR produced by Elderly Nation Production. It was released shortly before the presidential elections initially scheduled for Saturday 18 March 2023. Even though the skit did a direct campaign for a candidate, it was a dramatized general advice to the Nigerian electorate to disregard ethnicity, religion, zone, and political party and vote the individual based on proven records of integrity and competence. It also gave general voter education based on the dates for the elections and a few other things the electorate need to know ahead of the election.

Tinubu and Peter Obi

Another video skit titled *Tinubu and Peter Obi*, produced by Spartacuz Comedy, is a cautionary note to the supporters of the political parties and their candidates. The skit is structured in form of a political debate between presidential candidates of two political parties. The debate witnessed the use of the known mannerisms of the said candidates. During the debate, the two supporters are seen interfering and creating antagonistic atmosphere. At the end, the candidates leave only for the supporters to stay back attempting to have a physical combat. This is the type of situation that is usually witnessed in Nigeria where party supporters usually clash resulting in fatalities. For instance, on Thursday February 23 2023, supporters of two political parties clashed in Kano leading to the death of some persons and leaving many others injured (*The Cable* par.1). However, reports about the clash carry conflicting information about the actual number of casualties. Similar clashes are recorded to have occurred in Lagos in

January 2023, in Port Harcourt in April 2023, in Ibadan in March 2023, and in Bauchi in March 2023 to mention but a few. All these clashes led to the death of persons and injury of many others. Yet, the candidates are usually seen after the elections winning and dinnning together to the disappointment of the said supporters. The video skit *Tinubu and Peter Obi* cautions Nigerians to steer clear of such ugly occurrences of the past in the 2023 elections.

The Election

One of the most important messages from the video skits for the 2023 general elections in Nigeria can be said to be contained in the skit titled *The Election* produced by Brain Jotter Comedy. Here, a popular politician simply called Chief comes to an uncompleted building to meet some guys who live there. The guys call him praise names as he details them to, as usual, go and obstruct voting in a polling unit presumably the stronghold of his opponent. The boys agree to the job saying it is a small task for them. Having agreed to do the job, Chief goes to his car to signal his son sitting inside the car to give him some money to pay for the job. At that instance, the boys notice his son and inform Chief that the job will be easier as his son will join them in executing it. Of course, Chief objects to this, telling them that his son is busy with studies and is also not a local street boy like them. This angers them making them hit the son. As Chief tries to protect his son, the leader of the gang hits him making him jump into his car and run away.

The message of the above skit is that the youths should shun election violence. Hitherto, the practice had been that the politicians keep their families in the background with tight security arrangements and then foreground the youths and arm them with weapons and some money to execute election malpractice and bring winning for them at all costs. Once the said elections are won, the youths used to execute the election are taken to the background while the families of the politicians are brought to the foreground for inaugurations and swearing-in ceremonies. It can be argued that the message was well received by Nigerian youths. A report of 5 April 2023 by the *Premium Times* states that the 2023 polls in Nigeria recorded the least violence in the history of the country with a fatality rate put at between 13 and 28. The report went ahead to state that the 1964/1965 elections recorded 200 deaths; 1993 elections 100 deaths; 1999 elections 80 deaths; 2003 elections 100 death; 2007 elections 300 deaths; 2011 elections 800 deaths; and the 2015 elections 150 deaths. This is an improvement on the past experiences, probably because of the kind of voters' education that the social media theatre provided.

Conclusion

Although the social media theatre is still developing, it is found to be a viable platform for theatre and theatrical performances for quick influence. The 2023 Nigerian general elections witnessed a new dimension that is different from what it used to be. The social media could be said to be a factor that changed the narrative in Nigerian politics in 2023 by bringing participants together to freely share opinions. Put differently, the social media was able to create virtual town halls. Subsequently, theatre as a

propagandist tool as well as a weapon of mass instruction created an unprecedented awareness for the youths and the-less-politically-conscious in Nigeria. The analysis of a few of the video skits for the election in this research reveals that the masses may have harvested some wealth of knowledge bordering on electoral consciousness, candidate's leadership qualities and general voters' education. The conclusion reached is that theatre as a vehicle of instruction engaged in creating social awareness that enhance citizenship responsiveness sought to facilitate the democratic process for good leadership in the 2023 Nigerian general elections. There have been many more of such new media video skits produced after the elections to pass critical comments on the eventual outcomes of the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, especially on perceived shortcomings and their resultant effects.

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