



Advances in Social Media and Political Campaigns in Elections: An Assessment of the 2016 General Elections in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

Initially meant for social networking and interacting with acquaintances, the new media in the form of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are now becoming crucial instruments in political communication. This is because social media has proven to be an effective format for political communication given its several features like photo sharing, status update, tags, post sharing, likes, live videos, video sharing amongst others. Furthermore, social media has democratized media access, and has afforded people who have previously been side-lined by traditional media an important platform for political mobilization. Most importantly, it has generated interest in politics among young people. The intersection between traditional media and other social media has augmented their efficiency by amplifying their reach. The study is an explorative one that adopted purposive sampling to select participants from the New Patriotic Party (NPP), National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the Progressive People's Party (PPP). The findings revealed that although presidential candidates integrated social media into their campaign they are yet to exploit its full potential. However, social media by itself could not guarantee a candidate victory in the elections. Therefore, presidential candidates need to strike a balance between their campaigns on social media with the ground campaigns to ensure that they reach most of the electorate.

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1. INTRODUCTION

New media have been playing an increasingly central role in American elections since they first appeared in 1992. While television remains the main source of election information for a majority of voters, digital communication platforms have become prominent. New media have triggered changes in the campaign strategies of political parties, candidates, and political organizations; reshaped election media coverage; and influenced voter engagement. The 1992 presidential election ushered in a new era of campaign media. A multilayered communication environment exists for election campaigns. The media system is transitioning from a broadcast model associated with traditional media where general-interest news items are disseminated to the mass public through a narrowcasting model where carefully crafted messages target discrete audience segments [1].

The 2008 Barack Obama election to the White House is partly attributed to his extensive use of the new media to canvass support and raise funds. The successful use of Facebook and Twitter in mobilizing revolutionaries who ousted the East African dynasties has demonstrated the efficacy of social media as a tool of mobilisation. Following these events, considerable academic attention has been directed at understanding the role of social media in political campaigns. The use of Facebook in election campaigns and political communication has arguably widened the democratic space, allowing previously marginalised groups to participate in the democratic process [2,3]. Most importantly, social media have facilitated political communication for parties that were struggling to reach potential voters.

However, questions remain about the efficacy of social media as a political communication medium. Questions abound regarding the manner in which people view information shared through social media, and whether this can be used to predict the outcome of elections and gauge the atmosphere on the ground. The efficacy of Facebook and Twitter derive from features such as sharing pictures and information, status updates, posts, tags and the 'like' function. However, social media do not replace the traditional medium of political campaigning but rather serve to complement it. I argue that the integration of traditional media and

new media has enhanced political communication, which therefore presents a great opportunity for all parties to reach out to their voters. Unlike traditional media, new media are accessible at less cost, and are insulated from excessive editorial interference and state censorship. The agenda of every political party is to capture political power. This drive to control the affairs of government, especially in a democratic dispensation, it is hinged on winning an election which in Ghana is very often characterized by vigorous campaign and interactions with the electorate. Although there is no single best campaign strategy, but the right strategy may differ from one candidate to another and for each election [4].

Ghana's political history, especially in the fourth republican democratic dispensation has seen many strategies deployed in general elections from the late 90's to the early 2000's, including the use of public fora mainstream media advertisement and party rallies and other obvious partisan related activities. Ranging from the use of town criers as a tool of campaigning, to Door-to-Door engagements, campaign strategies especially for political reasons have evolved. Ghana's vigorous campaign strategies by political parties, however, have deep roots dating back to the nation's pre and post independent era. For instance, the country's first President Dr. Kwame Nkrumah is noted for strategic campaigning. Aside the conventional political rallies and other political party meetings and demonstrations, Nkrumah saw the media as a useful campaign tool hence a newspaper known as the Accra Evening News, a daily newspaper was established in the Gold Coast in 1948 to reach out to more people who may not have the opportunity to meet the political figure in person at the time [5].

In recent time however, the trend of political campaigns and its effects have remained similarly the same until the advent of social media use in Ghana's fourth republican democratic dispensation. The global breakthrough in social media offers numerous possibilities for meaningful and equal participation, as well as chances for new forms of transparency and accountability, in ways that were until recently, unimaginable [6]. According to Ndlela, & Mano [3], the rise in the use of smartphones and an increased adoption of mobile internet in Africa are fundamentally

altering the media ecology for election campaigns. Statistics show that the use of mobile phones and mobile internet has increased considerably in the continent. This is by no means suggestive that the scale of tactics deployed within electioneering periods have remained the same over the years. It is palpable that ever since the formation of the Accra Evening news, more press houses have emerged with a touch of electronic media; mainly radio and television stations with wider and intense coverage nationwide. These platforms have become very preferred political campaigning tools for political parties and their candidates who have increased interactions with their electorate and gather feedback on how to advance with their political message, slogans and other related strategies. But a new phenomenon appears to be emerging on the internet. The advance of this technology has diversified user interactions hereby bringing information much closer to the average citizen. By the creation of online applications such as Facebook and Twitter interactions between citizens from all walks of life have been increased and virtually, society has been created on the internet space which we refer to as "social media".

The New Media is a powerful tool for communication and dissemination of information. The Media has evolved as statistics shows that around 9% of Africans use social media, with South Africans among the world leaders in time spent on social networks with an average of 3.2 hours a day, compared to a global average of 136 minutes, according to data from marketing consultants, Ghana averages a time of 176 minutes daily.

In Ghana, new media usage is continuously growing and estimated at 19% of social media penetration thus representing 5.6 million of social media users as at January 2018 [7] with almost every online mobile user having a social media account or on a social messaging channel such as WhatsApp and Facebook. Unlike the conventional means of political communications social media now creates a golden opportunity for a political actor to directly engage an electorate in a faster, direct and timely manner. The creation of WhatsApp platforms and Facebook pages by political figures and their assigns has changed the political campaign dynamics as there is a noticeable increase in interactions and a seeming voter behavior pattern which is often reflected through these virtual of technology-driven platforms like Facebook and

WhatsApp. The basic aim of this study therefore, is to examine the use of these new platforms (Facebook and WhatsApp) by political parties, politicians and key political stakeholders on voter's behavior, political knowledge, efficacy, and participation. The paper assesses the relationship between the growing use of selected social media handles and political participation.

The objectives of this study are to find out how political parties used social media as a tool of communication to campaign during the 2016 general elections in Ghana.

In what follows, the paper is organized into four main sections. In order to properly situate the empirical analysis, the first section discusses the relevant literature relating to social media and politics, social media and election campaigns and the general elections in 2016. This is followed by a discussion of how the data was collected for the study and the techniques involved. The third section analyses the data and discusses the major findings, while the fourth section provides the conclusion, the paper concludes with a recommendation for the future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review discusses key topics on political campaigns, social media and politics and the 2016 general elections in Ghana thus highlighting its importance in a democratic society.

2.1 How Social Media Works in Politics

Broadly referred to as Web 2.0 applications, new media applications come in different forms. YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter are the most popular, but social networks such as Tumblr, Pinterest and many others are also important [8]. Social media rely heavily on internet-based social networks that allow people to develop profiles and link with other users who have also signed into the networks. Vergeer [8] describe these networks as 'weblogs', and comment that such social networks use a "bottom-up approach, focused on sharing content online, collaboration among people and enabling socializing online". Users can view the profiles of other users, interact through blog posts visible to the subscriber's Facebook friends, and post pictures, messages and links to other sources [9].

Unlike more traditional internet sites, Web 2.0 applications have been able to draw a lot of

attention because of their interactivity. These applications promote online expression because the online community can post their views and engage in debates (Kushin & Yamamoto 2015). The applications allow for the formation of social communities and groups, which facilitates the exchange of ideas and discussions on many issues of public concern. Through their picture and video posting facilities, they are able to engage subscribers in political events that are happening far away, even as those events unfold.

Viewed from this perspective, the internet promotes deliberative and participatory democracy. It is, without a doubt, becoming one of the dominant political communication tools. Realising the potential of social media, political parties and politicians have sought to tap into the networks and social communities to canvass political support. As a result, recent elections across the world have seen an increased use of social media to raise funds for campaigns and to solicit votes.

Wasswa [9] claims that campaigns play a role in influencing voters, by setting the agenda and by reminding voters about issues of concern and the performance of serving officers. To some extent they determine what needs to be discussed and perhaps how it must be discussed. The utility value of Facebook derives from its huge subscription base. Effing, Hillegersberg and Huibers [10], states that in April 2011, Facebook had 600 million registered subscribers, and people spend more time on Facebook than any other website. This makes it one of the most effective mediums for delivering messages. Facebook has bridged the digital divide, and most importantly it has democratized media access, particularly to less-resourced candidates and political parties. It has also enhanced political competition. Because of these strengths, social media present a prime opportunity to democratise election campaigns, by allowing groups that could have been disadvantaged by a lack of resources to reach their potential voters (Verg).

Despite this great potential and some evidence of extensive use of social media in certain political communications, Effing et al. [10] observe that the use of social media in electoral campaigns tends to lack a strategy or comprehensive plan. This hinders political parties and candidates from obtaining the maximum benefit. Vergeer et al. [8] acknowledge that the

liberal nature of social media is not without risks, because although candidates might not have public relations skills, they assume a leading role in their online campaigns.

Vergeer et al. [11] highlight that social media have reduced party control over candidates' campaign strategies and interactions with supporters. Generally this means that candidates express their position and views independently of party influence. Candidates are directly accountable to the Facebook community for their decisions. This creates a strong bond between the electorate and the candidate [11]. Crucially, unlike traditional media, which do not permit immediate feedback or allow a candidate the chance to immediately clarify a comment if they are misinterpreted, Facebook allows such instant feedback.

Conveniently, traditional media, including newspapers and radio stations, have joined the Facebook hype to expand their audiences. This means that in addition to traditional channels, news is transmitted today through social networks in a way that allows for conversations and dialogue about issues.

According to Javuru [2], this interaction encourages deliberation and debates on different public matters. In this way, social media can promote citizenship and deliberative democracy (Javuru 2013).

Furthermore, Javuru [2] observes that accredited and affiliated journalists can use their own Facebook pages to upload news and reports, with the little restriction imposed by laws such as those which regulate formal journalism and newspaper editorial policies. In this way, Facebook promotes independent reporting. Accordingly, Javuru [2] concludes that, new media is seen by some as an antidote to the heavy handed approach with which the government sometimes handles criticisms from the media largely because one can be anonymous and there are no premises to raid and close down. (p. 361).

Although social media are widely credited for promoting political engagement, Lee [12] claims that relying excessively on social media to mobilise voters is often viewed as elitist, because people without internet access are left out. However, the integration between traditional and social media suggests that the new media can have as much influence as traditional media. It is

not clear whether Twitter and Facebook politics reflect offline political moods. However, just like traditional media, they can provide an important measure of public sentiment.

2.2 New Media and Election Campaigns

Not much is known about the actual effect of social media on election outcomes, or its intersection with other factors in influencing voter decisions. However, the effectiveness of social media in mobilising political action should not be underestimated. Although not the only factor, social media certainly played a critical role in bringing down Middle East and East African dynasties. According to Bosch [13], the online 'event' of the Egyptian revolution saw more than 80 000 people being mobilised by social media, mostly Facebook. Evidence also suggests that the Arab revolution and Philippines upheaval, which culminated in the resignation of the president, were both facilitated by social media. This indicates that social media are becoming very useful tools for political mobilisation.

The 2008 American presidential elections also saw an increase in the use of social media to rally voters. President Obama, in particular, relied heavily on various social networks to reach out to supporters, individuals and organisations [14]. Twitter, Flickr, Digg, YouTube, Myspace and Facebook were among the Online Social Interactive Media (OSIM) that he used. Indeed, some people attribute Obama's success in the 2008 election to his extensive use of social networking websites. Obama's use of web 2.0 technology has sparked much debate and academic interest in the relationship between social media and election campaigns.

Similarly, the 2014 Indian election saw increased use of Facebook. In view of the extensive use of social media, CNN referred to the election as "India's first social media election" [15]. Politicians in African countries have also used Facebook extensively in election campaigns. President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria and his cabinet, as well as the Rwandese President, Paul Kagame, were among the first heads of state to interact with people through Facebook [15]. Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta also used social media to engage young people [9]. Kenya has more than 14 million internet users, many of whom make use of social media sites. Uhuru Kenyatta's Facebook page had an enormous following, with over 500 000 'likes'. Without doubt, many comments or items of information

reached more than just these 500 000 followers. According to Portland Communications, Kenya ranks second after South Africa in the use of mobile social networking. Wasswa [9] states that social media profoundly contributed to Kenyatta's success. Jensen [16] claims that political parties were visible in social media in the build-up to the 2014 election in South Africa. By 13 November 2014, the Economic Freedom Fighters had the most likes on Facebook, followed by the African National Congress and Democratic Alliance [16]. According to Bosch [13], South African political parties, the Electoral Commission, and civil society are all stepping up their use of social media to drive the masses to the polls.

Facebook is one of the most widely used social network sites in South Africa, and with 3.2 million users it ranks as the most popular of all social network media in South Africa. If the number of followers on Facebook pages is anything to go by, it seems safe to conclude that messages communicated on Facebook would reach a considerable number of people.

A 2012 study conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) on the 'South African mobile generation' found that South Africa is one of the leading nations in the use of mobile technology and social networking in Africa. This wide access has facilitated citizen participation and engagement in politics, and can generate interest in voting and other democratic processes. According to Wasswa [9], most young adults develop an interest in politics by interacting with politically engaged friends on social media. In this way, they help to transmit up-to-date information through blogs and online posts. Although social media are definitely becoming an important factor in political campaigning, some experts dismiss social media dialogue as 'pointless babble' [17]. However, experiences across the world suggest that the potential of social media should not be underrated. According to Javuru [2], some scholars of democracy and participation question the diversity of views and the quality of arguments advanced on social media. Such scholars posit that social media involves interactions between people who already share common positions and views on public matters, and therefore do not serve to broaden debates. Javuru [2] states that 'These commentators argue that much online interaction simply involves the meeting of "likeminded" people leading to a fragmented public sphere of insulated "deliberative enclaves" where group

positions and practices are reinforced rather than openly critiqued.'

Javuru [2] also claims that the potential of social media to act as an engine for public debate and engagement is compromised by people having limited internet access. While it may be true that the effectiveness of social media could be compromised by the digital divide, the increasing sophistication of mobile phones has greatly improved many people's access to the internet and therefore to social media. Bosch [13], writing about South Africa, confirms that mobile internet will bridge the digital divide, and comments that the same holds true for most developing countries.

2.3 2016 General Elections in Ghana

The 2016 general election in Ghana was arguably the most hotly contested election in the history of Ghana's democracy. Stakes were high in both the opposition and ruling parties, as well as civil society. Talk about the elections dominated many conversations. The media, electronic and print, traditional and the new were awash with reports on political campaigning. The campaign strategies, the nature of issues raised, and the interest of young people in politics were additional features that made the 2016 election unique. One outcome of young people's interest in politics was the increased use of social media as a mobilising tool. Traditional media started making use of social media to amplify their reach. This extensive use of social media, in particular Facebook, added a new dimension to the campaigns. Candidates did not have to rely on traditional media to communicate with the electorate; their messages could be delivered undiluted and in real time. This ignited excitement among many subscribers, whose attention was drawn to election debates and issues related to the upcoming elections.

Three main political parties and their candidates had a presence in social media. Individual candidates also created their own pages, each bearing their party colours and listing the principles for which they stood. The 2016 general election in Ghana saw an unprecedented use of social media as a campaign tool. Facebook pages of Ghanaian youth were dominated by pictures taken at political rallies and portraits of political candidates. Certainly social media had become an important platform for political campaigning.

3. METHODS AND TECHNIQUES OF DATA COLLECTION

The methodology employed for this research was qualitative because the researcher wanted to comprehend the various ways social media was utilized for political campaigns from the viewpoint of the people who engage with it in this case, the political parties. The data collection method used was in-depth interviews and content analysis. The researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with three political party members who formed the core of their parties' social media campaign team. The data for the content analysis was sourced from the Facebook pages of the NPP and the PPP. The respondent for the NDC stated in the interview that due to the menace of fake account, the party did not use a well-designed Facebook page solely for the purpose of campaigning as such, the researchers used the posts from the official Facebook page of the party's presidential candidate. The content analysis complemented the interviews conducted which made it possible for in depth analysis than what would have been with the interviews from the three political parties.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The paper examined posts from the official Facebook pages of the NPP and PPP. In other to have a clearer understanding of how the political parties used Facebook, the researcher gathered and analyzed data that were posted in the last five months to the run up of the December 2016 elections. The study manually gathered the data by visiting the Facebook pages of the political parties. This period was chosen because it enabled the researcher to trace the trends in their posts and also to understand the dynamics in using Facebook to campaign as the Election Day got closer. In all, one thousand and fifty-nine (1059) Facebook posts were examined.

The NPP posted three hundred and seventy-six (376) times within the period examined, the PPP posted four hundred and eighty-five (485) times and the NDC posted one hundred and ninety-eight (198) times. The figures above indicate that PPP posted one hundred and nine (109) times more than NPP did but NDC posted less and though not certain, it can be attributed to the fact that the Presidential candidate's instead of the party's Facebook page was used for this analysis. To allow for easy interpretation and analysis, I categorized all the one thousand and

fifty-nine posts into themes like private life, electoral campaigns, electoral news, public announcement, political advertisement, official government function, past/present government portfolio, donations and electoral advocacy. Also the medium of communication in a day was looked at.

With regard to the first objective, this study established the nature of social media and how it is being used by the world today, elaborating with facts, the figures of individual that uses social media and the daily average usage of social media in Ghana together with the world.

Also in relation to the second objective the study revealed how political parties in Ghana utilized social media for political campaign purposes. The data gathered indicates that mobilizing supporters online to participate in offline campaign programs with the exception of voting was largely missing especially in the contents that were posted on the Facebook pages of the political parties. Much of the campaign online by the political parties sought to draw the attention of their followers to what was happening on their offline campaign grounds and what they intended to do when they are voted into power. It was largely observed that, all the parties posted pictures and live videos of what went on during their campaign tours to the various towns and villages. For instance if a candidate on a campaign tour made a stop at Zabzugu-Tatale Cattle Market in the Northern Region, his social media team would take pictures and videos of his or her interaction with the market folks and post them on their Facebook page. The NPP however did quite better with the NPP loyal ladies campaign which mobilized young ladies online to join the ladies wing of the party to use innovative ways like washing cars to campaign for the party. Also in terms of providing online mobilizing structures to pull traffic to their political pages on Facebook, the NPP made strives to enable their supporters to campaign on behalf of the party with the 'I am for Nana' and 'Colors' campaign which according to the NPP respondent had a huge following online.

In general, the parties used social media as a medium of just broadcasting and popularizing their campaign messages although some of them used it as a means of interaction. This means that, further studies can be undertaken to ascertain how virtual or online interaction between party followers and the party can influence followers to vote for them. None of the

parties used social media to solicit for funds, raise volunteers or generate data to send user specific campaign messages to their followers.

The study further revealed that Facebook, the most used social media by the political parties enabled the followers of the presidential candidates to interact online like never before.

Unlike traditional media which set their own agenda which sometimes blocks direct interaction between political parties and their followers, social media bypasses the lengthy media strategies and offers a direct stream of establishing and exchanging virtual bonds.

However the researcher argues that online interaction between party followers and the party's candidates in Ghana occurred at two different levels, one mediated by the social media teams of the parties and the other unmediated. The former means that, the social media teams of the various parties on behalf of their candidate interacted with the followers through the various posts they broadcast on their Facebook pages. As the respondent for the PPP and NPP stated they filtered most of the comments that were passed by their followers online and those that they deemed fits, they responded or were forwarded to the top hierarchy for further deliberation after which they replied. Although this form of mediation is intra and quite different from what pertains to the traditional media there is no denying that, it is still a form of mediation. The latter implies a direct upward communication between the followers and the party candidates. This direct form of communication was adopted by only two of the political parties used for this study. By using Facebook live both NPP and PPP presidential candidate interacted with their followers online which established some bonds of affiliation as indicated by the parties' respondents. The NPP also used Twitter chat to setup live debates between their followers and their presidential candidates and other key party representatives.

5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the ways in which social media is revolutionizing electoral campaigns using Ghana's 2016 electoral campaigns as a case study. Although all the parties admitted its importance in reaching out to millions of people and shaping the political thinking of social media users, they as well conceded it was not a straight away guarantee for a candidate's victory in an

election given the nuances in politics and voting. The PPP respondent for instance outlined certain challenges that make it difficult to fully invest in newly digitized electoral campaigns on social media like data mining. These challenges include the lack of internet connectivity, proper addressing system and the lack of political understanding in Ghana largely caused by the politicians in the country. This in other words implies that, the political idiosyncrasies of a country largely contributes to how new ideas and technology are embraced and utilized by both the parties and their followers. It nonetheless does not stop researchers from drawing some healthy comparisons between countries. That said, it is safe to conclude that social media was fairly used for electoral campaign purposes in Ghana's 2016 election but it did not radically change what political parties in Ghana do during electioneering periods especially traditional forms of campaigning, rather it introduced newer forms of campaigning which complemented the already existing ones.

However, given that it was still a new phenomenon that political parties were exploring, the way it was used in the 2016 election may not be the way it will be used in the 2020 election as all three parties alluded to having plans to explore it further in future elections hence the need for further studies on this topic.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommend that political parties in Ghana adopts new digital strategies to actively engage their followers on social media like raising funds so that like political parties elsewhere, they can go beyond just reporting their offline activities to their followers online.

It also recommends that the use of foul language and the posting of fake news are seriously looked at and the authenticity of various posts must be thoroughly verified.

Political parties in Ghana must invest in cyber security technologies in order to combat social media propaganda to have a sanitized engagement with their followers online to foster a safer digital online political life.

DISCLAIMER

The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly use products in our area of research and country. There is absolutely

no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, participant's written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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