Use of Twitter Among Political Office Holders for Public Communication in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges

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Abstract

The explosion of the internet in recent times, has dramatically transformed the way information is created, disseminated and distributed. In an age when information equates to power, a diversity of opinion can actually lead to more creative problem solving and more equitable outcomes in a society. This paper appraises the use of Twitter among political office holders for public communication looking at its prospects and challenges. The paper adopted textual analysis and interview as method of gathering data for the study to discover the role Twitter plays in breaking the news and how traditional media channels are now picking up tweets of political office holders and treating it as press releases for public consumption. Anchored on social presence theory, which is one of the most popular constructs used to describe and understand how people socially interact in an online learning environment, this study found that Twitter is a great platform for public communication, but access to internet is still limited to urban areas and among the elites, unlike the US where 62 percent of adults get news from Twitter, and a president has over 42 million followers, but in Nigeria, we are not yet there. We should not discard the use of the traditional press releases and regular engagement with the media and stakeholders.
Key words: Communication, Platform; Political Office Holders; Public and Twitter

INTRODUCTION

For journalism, the information age heralded the emergence of new media technologies, which decentered the very act of communication by widening the spaces for engagement with audiences and participation by them in mediated discourse (Hassan & Thomas, 2006). Such new media technologies have come to be generically referred to as 'social media' because of their ability to permit instantaneous human interactions and inter-connectivity across space and time (Stein, 2006; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Breuer, 2011).

The other commonly used term for 'social media' is 'social networking sites', which, according to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 63) are "applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other"

Tayeebwa (2016) opines that, the emergence of social media platforms, notably twitter has presented several opportunities to conventional/traditional journalism, such as improved access to online resources and the sharing of information, despite professional impediments such as the instantaneous dissemination of unsubstantiated information that may turn out to be outright false or defamatory. Twitter is a free social networking microblogging service that allows registered members to broadcast short posts called *tweets*. Twitter members can broadcast tweets and follow other users' tweets by using multiple platforms and devices. Tweets and replies to tweets can be sent by cell phone text message, desktop client or by posting at the *Twitter.com* website.

Twitter was created in March 2006 by Jack Dorsey,

Noah Glass, Biz Stone and Evan Williams, and was launched in July of that year. The service rapidly gained worldwide popularity. As of 2016, Twitter had more than 319 million monthly active users, and it is said that on a particular day of the 2016 US presidential election, Twitter proved to be the largest source of breaking news, with 40 million election-related tweets sent by 10 p.m. (Eastern Time). Twitter has become the most popular platform for this purpose and that has attracted governments all over the world (The cable, 2017)

Twitter is an information network made up of 140-character messages called tweets. It is used by millions of people, top government officials, organizations, and businesses to discover and share new information. Twitter users subscribe to receive tweets by following an account. Followers receive messages in their timeline that includes a feed of all the account they subscribed to. Twitter has become an important tool for connecting people interested in specific health and safety information. Twitter's information network has grown at a fast pace, with 460,000 daily sign-ups and over 200 million registered users (Lassen & Brown, 2011). Twitter is more than a platform to disseminate information; it also provides opportunities to listen to conversations and gather information in real-time. Twitter's search engine (http://search.twitter.com) is a great tool for monitoring conversations on any given topic on Twitter – it is generally limited to the past two weeks of public tweets of all the accounts they have subscribed to. These short, easy to read, public messages make Twitter a powerful, real-time way of communicating (Lassen & Brown, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

The emergence of the new media platforms have in many ways changed the scope of journalism practice the world over. The internet has transformed the idea of who becomes the source of a message. Since not all internet publishers are journalists, professional journalists and media organizations have inadvertently and emphatically lost their monopoly as gate keepers (Werker, Valcke, Paulssen, Geens & Vandenbrande, 2008). The proliferation of information on the internet raises some special editorial concerns for professional journalists. The internet especially twitters platform has altered the long existing channel of sourcing news and information through government press release and press conferences. Today most top government officials in Nigeria own and operate twitter handles which they use in engaging the public. However this development is affecting the usual face to face interaction between the journalists and top government officials. Journalists trail the twitter handles of top political office holders to pick up tweets to treat as news for public consumption. Therefore, this paper seeks to find out the effectiveness or otherwise of the use of twitter among political office holders for public communication in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following objectives:

To ascertain the effectiveness of twitter handles of top five political office holders in Nigeria.

To find out journalists view on the use of twitter for public communication among political office holders in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopted different research approaches to enable the researcher thoroughly treat the subject matter. The main sources of data for the study included a review of existing secondary data on twitter use among top political office holders in Nigeria. The paper adopted textual analysis as research design, using the qualitative method which involves the use of dialectical hermeneutic procedure in analyzing data. The paper examined fived twitter handles of top political office holders in Nigeria namely: @MBuhari, @ProfOsibanjo, @bukolasaraki, @yakubudogara, @Ike_Ekweremadu. Interview sessions were carried out with Journalists in Jos metropolis to find out their disposition toward the use of twitter among top political office holders in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

This paper is anchored on *Social Presence Theory* which was developed by John Short, Ederyn Williams and Bruce Christie in 1976. The theory measures communication media based on the degree of awareness of the other person in a communication interaction. They theorists posited that communication media differ in their degree of social presence and that these differences play an important role in how people interact. They conceptualized social presence primarily as a quality of a communication medium that can determine the way people interact and communicate. More importantly they believe that a medium with high degree of social presence is seen as being sociable, warm and personal, whereas a medium with a low degree of social presence is seen as less personal.

Walther (1992) cited in Asemah (2017) social presence theory is defined as the degree of awareness of another person in an interaction and the desire to exert ones presence in a social interaction online. Social presence is the degree of feeling, perception and reaction of being connected to another intellectual entity on computer mediated communication (Tu & McIaac, 2002, cited in Chih-Hsiung, 2012). Social presence has come to be viewed as the way individuals represent themselves in their online environment. It is a personal stamp that indicates that the individual is available and willing to engage and connect with other persons in their online community. Social presence is demonstrated by the way messages are posted and how those messages are interpreted by others (Papacharissi, 2004). The forgoing implies that different communication media enables

different levels of experiences of social presence of individuals who are engaged in communication. The medium give individuals room for interactivity. This theory thus can be applied in this study since use of Twitter among top political office holders for public communication is geared toward interacting with their followers and maintaining social presence online. The theory of social presence is one of the most popular constructs used to describe and understand how people socially interact in online learning environment.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 The Emergence of Twitter as Political Communication Tool

According to Jungherr (2016), twitter has become a pervasive tool in public communication among top government officials, politicians, journalists and non-governmental organizations. An increasing share of the public is using Twitter to comment on, interact around, and research public reactions to politics. These uses have met with growing scholarly attention. As of now, this research is fragmented, lacks a common body of evidence, and shared approaches to data collection and selection (Kobayashi & Ichifuji, 2015, p.55).

The use of twitter and mobile web applications has grown in recent times, particularly among young adults (Rainie et al., 2012; Smith and Duggan, 2012). Of significance for this age group is the rise in the use of twitter and mobile devices for obtaining political information, creating user-generated political content, and expressing political views and opinions. Surveys by the *Pew Internet & American Life Project* indicate the increasing popularity of twitter use, led by users aged 18–29, for political activities such as posting views regarding political and social issues, sharing news articles, following political figures, and watching political videos (Rainie et al., 2012). In response to the growing political use of twitter, recent research has examined whether these media affect young adults' political behaviours (Baumgartner & Morris, 2010; Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Vitak et al., 2011). While evidence for twitter use for political information consumption is somewhat mixed, for the most part, research supports the role of mobile web applications and online political expression in fostering political participation (Campbell & Kwak, 2010; Gil de Zuniga et al., 2010). Yet theoretical attention in these lines of work has focused largely on the main effects of these newer communication activities on political participation among the general public. Few studies have explored whether citizens, particularly young adults, may become more politically engaged through actively seeking out news while also frequently expressing opinions online.

Since its emergence, twitter has gone from being a social interaction tool to a central feature of a professional political campaign (Stromer-Galley, 2014). Politicians all over the world now invest considerable effort in creating Twitter handle profiles and distributing content across them. Indeed, content distribution is sometimes left in the hands of paid professional staff while others tweet directly to their followers like in the case of US President Donald Trump who is perhaps Twitter's biggest customer, tweeting directly many times a day to his nearly 42 million followers (The Cable, 2017) Despite this enthusiasm, systematic empirical evidence of the actual impact of twitter in campaigning is thin. Only a handful of studies have sought to empirically test the relationship between use of twitter handles and campaign outcomes.

Use of twitter is becoming increasingly widespread in contemporary politics (Lilleker, Tenscher, & Štětka, 2015), and as such has attracted a large volume of followers. Jungherr (2016) as political actors are progressively adopting these twitter, some authors suggests that the low cost of communication on the platform enabled them to level the playing field when compared to traditional media channels.

Following the 2008 Obama presidential run, the use of twitter for campaigns were no longer an amateur activity – technical expertise, focus group research and specialization of staffing all contributed to what was an international trend. European political parties were eager to study the strategies used in Obama effort, and Twitter expertise was exported from the United States to European countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom to help political campaigns there to exploit the marketing potential of Twitter. The largest political party in Norway, the Labour Party, visited Obama 2008 campaign staffers for training and skill development regarding Twitter (Karlsen, 2013). Likewise, the UK Conservative Party hired the 2012 Obama campaign manager Jim Messina before the 2015 British election to 'bring to their operation the same binding marriage of Twitter and political organization that many in the US credit with securing Mr. Obama a second term' (Stratton, 2013).

The 2016 Clinton campaign represented a continuation of the professionalized Twitter campaigns established in previous presidential campaigns by the Democratic Party – technological expertise and digital communication structure, after all, tend to transfer from one cycle to the next (Kreiss, 2016). In contrast, the 2016 Trump campaign started from scratch in the realm of political communication; while Donald Trump was already a savvy exploiter of Twitter as both a celebrity and a business owner, he had never been involved in a political election campaign. In light of the theory of an increasing professionalization of American election campaigns, the 2016 Trump campaign represented a counter-trend. Rather than copying the Twitter strategies of the professionalized campaigns run by the Democratic Party, Donald Trump chose a strategy better described as amateurism. Its

amateurism did not derive from any lack of strategy or competence about basic media logics, however, because Trump knew how to get media coverage, validating those studies that have demonstrated that celebrity politicians are several times more likely than unknown politicians to be quoted in the mainstream news on the basis of their social media posts (Chadwick, 2014; Wallsten, 2013). His celebrity status therefore fuelled the Trump campaign and enabled a strategy based on a controversial and unexpected use of Twitter. His image as a candidate was largely formed by his widely circulated tweets, which were often quoted and debated in the mainstream media.

1.2 The Use of Twitter Among Political Office Holders in Nigeria

If the essence of Twitter in public communication is to engage the public directly, clearly its success rate will depend on the percentage of the population that uses Twitter, and the number of followers account owners has (The Cable, 2017). In Nigeria, it is not clear if any government or MDAs tries to use Twitter to side-step the press or go around their filter. If that is the case they have failed woefully because most of their key followers are indeed the media, which publishes what it receives on Twitter. Some political office holders have twitter handles which they sometimes deploy it for public communication, a very good example are that of the Senator representing Kaduna Central in Senate @ShehuSani, Bayelsa East Senator @BenBruce, Kogi West Senator @DinoMelaye. Nigerians exert little or no presence in twitter when it comes to engaging with their leaders.

The source of the tweet also determines its usage. There have been cases recently where some government spokespersons tweeted vital news into the dark because they didn't have much followership, even in the media. For example on July 3, 2017, the spokesman of a top government official tweeted his principal was travelling overseas for the media to relay to the public. But as at the following morning, this writer was the only one who had used it in his news bulletin Kamp (2016, p. 9).

Stakeholders in public communication arena have since harnessed the utility of Twitter in their interaction process, and Nigeria, despite structural challenges, is not exempted (Odeyemi &Monunsola, 2016). Twitter was first used in a remarkable way in the 2011 elections (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2012), especially by former President Goodluck Jonathan, who used his Facebook account and Twitter handle to garner country-wide support. Ever since, politicians use of Twitter for election-related activity has risen (Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation, 2012).

1.3 Discussion of Findings

Findings from the textual analysis of the twitter handles of the top five political office holders in Nigeria reveals that @MBuhari which is the President's personal

twitter handles has a total of one million three hundred and fourty three thousand five hundred and sixty four (1,343,564) followers. With a trending number of two thousand seven hundred and thirty five (2,735) tweets. The vice President's twitter handle @ProfOsibanjo, has a total of two thousand six hundred and seventeen (2,617) followers, with a total of two hundred and six (206) tweets. The Senate President's twitter handle has a total of one million twenty seven thousand seven hundred and sixty three (1,027, 763) followers with nineteen thousand two hundred and fourty one (19,241) tweets. The speaker House of Representatives with twitter handle @YakubuDogara has a total of two hundred and sixty one thousand and ninety one (261,091) followers. With total number of tweets at eight thousand five hundred and thirty one (8,531) tweets. The Deputy Senate President's twitter handle has fifty one thousand one hundred and thirty six (51,136) followers with a lean number of tweets at a hundred and ten (110).

Therefore, this implies that a few Nigerians are following up on the handles of top political office holders which is far less compared to the 42 million followers US President Donald Trump commands. The implication is that if these top political office holders decide to use twitter alone for public communication, many Nigerians will be left out of the process. This findings correlates with the view of some cross section of journalists in Jos metropolis who affirmed that "Twitter has become the fastest way to release a statement, particularly public communication. Its effectiveness is actually in doubt because the percentage of Nigerians on Twitter is small. It could also be dysfunctional depending on who's handling it."

While responding to the question on what future does this new trend of using twitter handles among top political office holders portends for journalism practice, Mr. Bulus Gambo of The Nigerian Standard Newspaper said "It's not about the platform, it's the content. If they get the content right, Twitter use could be very effective. We've seen it in other climes. But our people jumped in without a strategy, without understanding it. Mainstream journalism will continue to exist side by side with today's new ways of communication".

Other practitioners who spoke on the issue of the credibility of the medium were all unanimous in their submission that it is definitely a less stressful way for government officials or their spokespersons to disseminate information. It has proven to be effective because it allows faster response to media publications. Reporters have now learnt to follow the handles of key government officials from where they regularly source news. However in Nigeria, it is only complementary to existing tools of public communication.

2. PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES IN USING TWITTER FOR COMMUNICATION

Tayeebwa (2016) Twitter platforms provide an opportunity for enhanced access to information and a diversification of sources and opinions. Twitter has greatly advanced the possibilities of "citizen journalism". They provide channels for everyone to reach out to the public, to share information and to express opinions without formal requirements and with a minimum interference in form of regulation and censorship (Kiranda, Mugisha, & Ojok, 2016, p. 55).Available statics demonstrate that the prevalent and most subscribed social media in Nigeria are Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, in that order Dunu and Uzochukwu (2015, p. 11).This study found a number of opportunities associated with the use of Twitter and new media technologies, in public communication to include:

(1) Twitter can improve accessibility as it allows citizens to reach out to political and other top government officials.

(2) Twitter can facilitate the dissemination of information for decision-making and the transfer of knowledge to the citizens.

(3) Twitter can provide platforms for discussion of pertinent issues between citizens and their leaders and among the citizens themselves.

(4) Twitter can facilitate effective networking among the citizens and the creation of different forms of organizations and communities online.

(5) Twitter can provide avenues for more participatory, inclusive and deliberative processes of decision making.

(6) Twitter can mobilize citizens around a cause and can spur social-political action.

3. CHALLENGES OF USING TWITTER AMONG POLITICAL OFFICE HOLDERS FOR PUBLIC COMMUNICATION IN NIGERIA

According to Tayeebwa (2016) traditional media players are yet to fully recognize Twitter information as "news". While it remains debatable whether digital technology has weakened or strengthened journalism. Critics argue that because of its unregulated nature, some overzealous users see it as a convenient conduit for the spread of all sorts of information without filtering, complete distortions, and falsehoods. Rumours, defamation, and hate speech also reigned freely. While it is true that Twitter and other social media sites have disrupted the way news breaks, it has also been argued that information that "breaks" on social media sites is often still not considered "news" by the general public until mainstream media confirms it through valid sources. This study also found some challenges associated with Twitter and other social media outlets which include:

(1) Accessibility may be impeded by a number of barriers such as poor infrastructure, poor literacy, cultural apprehension to new technologies, or profit interests.

(2) There appears to be a generational gap, with the younger generation making much more use of the opportunities of the internet and Twitter.

(3) Some observers see a tendency of the state to try to monitor, regulate or even block social media in a way that may threaten the freedom of expression online.

(4) Twitter has increasingly become a channel for different forms of offenses and so-called "cyber-crime" - such as "cyber-bullying", stalking, defamation, spread of false information and inciting messages.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, the use of twitter for public communication is not popular in Nigeria, access and use of twitter is clearly limited. This demonstrates a serious constraint in its effectiveness in reaching the large sector of Nigerians in the rural areas who are the target of most development and communication effort. Findings also revealed that Nigerian political office holders have few followers on twitter therefore making it difficult for effective engagement with the populace. There are incidences in the Nigerian public communication scene when social media posts have been picked up and *"voiced more loudly"* by the press, radio and TV stations. Twitter is a great platform for public communication, but unlike the US where 62 percent of adults get news from Twitter, and a president has over 42 million followers, in Nigeria we are not yet there. We should not discard the use of the traditional press releases and regular engagement with the media and stakeholders. Twitter alone cannot do the job of a good spokesperson and his or her principal.

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