

Amankwah, A. S. (2016). Winning the electorate at any cost: Assessing the viability of new media technologies as political communication tools in election. Journal of Communication, Media and Society (JOCMAS), Vol. 3, No. 1, October.

Winning the electorate at any cost: Exploring the viability of adopting new media technologies for political communication on elections in Ghana

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Abstract

New media technologies and their associated social media have been used by countries for a variety of purposes ranging from economics, health, education, agriculture and in recent times for politics. In politics, the focus of earlier studies has often been on developed countries, predominantly the United States of America. Little is known about the use of these technologies for political communication on elections in Africa, particularly in Ghana. This essay provides a perspective on the viability of political parties using new media technologies to communicate their manifestoes to citizens in elections in Ghana. The essay, which presents a peek into an ongoing research project, attempts to tease out the gap in communication literature about how new media could be exploited as a potential communication strategy that could enhance online political communication and campaigns during election periods in Ghana.

Keywords: new media technologies, elections, Ghana, symmetric, asymmetric communication

Introduction

Citizens need factual and credible information in a democracy to enable them make independent judgements and informed choices. Free and independent media such as traditional,

digital and social media provide this much needed information. Independent media serve as watchdog over government by demanding high standards from public officials. They report on whether or not the government is maintaining the trust reposed in it by the public. “A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both,” said the United States’ fourth president, James Madison, in 1822 (Bureau of International Information Programmes (BIIP) of the United States Department of State, 2012). And more than a hundred years later, that country’s 35th president, John F. Kennedy, said,

“The flow of ideas, the capacity to make informed choices, the ability to criticize, all of the assumptions on which political democracy rests, depend largely on communications” (A responsible press office in the digital age, 1).

Traditionally politicians and journalists originate and moderate political discourses and provide information to the public. However, the development and rapid adoption of new media technologies is changing all that. New media technologies are being applied to various aspects of social life including politics. Notwithstanding their merits, some critics argue that new media technologies fuel citizens’ disinterest in politics. They contend that the technologies detach users from engaging in civic life and its corresponding duties. Some scholars assert that people spend more time online for social utility and entertainment purposes rather than for political communication purposes (Davis 1999). Nielsen (2013) for instance, argues that the fact that citizens might be online, is not indicative that they are employing new media technologies for political communication. On the other hand, there are those who argue that new media technologies may be the cure for the public’s malaise of apathy and disinterest in political processes such as elections. They assert that new media technologies have the potential to foster political communication among citizens and between citizens and politicians thereby deepening democracy (Alec 2014:47; Towner & Dulio 2011:22). Studies on the application of new media technologies for politics and elections abound in the developed countries. However, in Africa, they are scant.

The present essay therefore presents a perspective on how new media can be applied to politics and elections in Africa generally and in Ghana particularly considering Castells (2007:250) assertion that new media technologies particularly the Web, could serve as politicians’ and citizens’ most “potent political force”. In a report by de Bastion, Stiltz and Herlitz (2012) ICT (new media technologies penetration in Africa is eleven percent. In the report, Claude Migisha Kalisa indicates using a case study that government-citizen interaction via twitter in Rwanda is improving significantly. This follows efforts by that country’s minister of health to use twitter as a platform to engage with medical personnel, patients and the public on how service delivery can be improved. The author found that notable recommendations poured out from that twitter engagement. Paula Akugizibwe of Uganda also reports on how Uganda

used SMS-based school monitoring systems 'EduTrac' to secure data regarding the output of primary schools across Ugandan schools. The 'EduTrac system tracks attendance of teachers, issues of sanitation, nutrition, curriculum development and funding of schools. The 'EduTrac' was piloted initially in 14 districts in 2011 and now covers 21 districts and 2000 schools. The programme is being progressively expanded and introduced in many more districts. In as much as involvement in 'EduTrac' is limited to leaders of educational institutions and youth advocacy groups, some teachers have embraced the system while others are apathetic. However, it is hoped that participation would increase as the indigenous people get to own it. According to Opeyemi Adamolekun, Nigeria's vibrant youth population also used mobile election monitoring app ReVoDa to monitor elections in 2011 to call political leaders and public office holders to account (de Bastion, Stiltz & Herlitz, 2012).

In Ghana, Mac-Jordan Degadjor reports on 'Ghana Decides' – an election monitoring project by BloggingGhana, a project funded by Star Ghana. The Ghana Decides project was propelled by a team of bloggers, social media enthusiasts, professional photographers and volunteers monitored electoral engagements from political parties and institutions, civil society organisations and non-governmental organisations before, during and after the 2012 elections in Ghana. The project team monitored and documented notable events and incidents during the elections using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube among others. It was found however that the use of new media technologies, particularly social media by the Electoral Commission of Ghana, civil society groups was abysmal. In all the instances cited above in the various case studies reported on by de Bastion et al (2012), new media technologies have been deployed for various purposes in some countries in Africa. In all the case studies, it is realized that the deployment of these technologies are concentrated in the bosom of the suppliers of information. The picture of how citizens are using it to communicate with political leaders and institutions with regards to elections is hazy indeed. This fact is corroborated by Ahiabenu (2013), when he asserts that new media technologies are employed more by journalists to disseminate information to the citizenry rather than vice versa. Literature on this phenomenon is scarce. This essay thus hopes to uncork a study that will interrogate the deployment of new media technologies for political communication purposes, particularly elections in Ghana.

However, considering that new media technologies could enhance the democratic process by renewing citizens' interest and drive to be involved politically (Towner & Dulio 2011:22), it becomes imperative to focus on how to harness its potentials effectively to engage with citizens online.. This is considering that they can positively influence citizens to participate in political processes, mobilise other supporters and engage in politics (Skoric 2015:63; Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela 2011). Michael (2013:46) proffers that new media technologies, particularly social media, could support the development of a more collaborative political culture but any such process would require authenticity on the part of politicians, informed contributions from the public and a willingness to engage from both. But largely, it is unknown the extent to which

political institutions and parties in developing countries generally and Ghana particularly is employing new media technologies to engage with their followers and the communication strategies that characterize their engagement.

This essay, which is a teaser of an ongoing research work, discusses the potency of online communication on new media platforms of the two major political parties in Ghana: the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) with respect to their manifestoes as well as the communication strategies both political parties and their followers adopt online.

The potentials of new media technologies for political communication internationally

In recent times, the rise of new media technologies and their corresponding social media networks has greatly increased the relevance of the Internet for political communication. Traditional media (radio, television and newspapers) typically offer one way communication in terms of politicians sending their messages to their followers. Where there is feedback, it is often delayed. Typical political campaigns have also been characterized by politicians giving their agenda to the electorates, often with no opportunity for questioning (feedback) from the audience apart from occasional applause, cheers and so on. However, with the effective use of websites and social media especially, politicians have the opportunity to interact more effectively with their audience. The potentials of social networking sites, blogs, microblogging (particularly Twitter), Wikis, as social software (Bahle 2006; O'Reilly 2005; Green & Pearson 2005, Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan 2012b) appear to be very promising in the political context as they can be an enabler for more participation and democracy. Creighton (2005) defines public participation as the process by which public concerns, needs and values are incorporated into governmental and corporate decision-making. The so-called e-participation focuses not only on this process but also on using the Internet as an additional or exclusive instrument to create dialogue between the elected and the electorate. In associated to this, Karpf (2009) introduces the notion of "Politics 2.0," which suggests the harnessing of the Internets' lowered transaction costs and its condition of information abundance, toward the goal of building more participatory, interactive political institutions. For instance Honeycutt and Herring (2009) assert that Twitter is used not only for one-way communication but often serves as a means of conversation. In their study, exploring conversation via Twitter, they find that 31% of a random sample of tweets contain an "@" –sign and that the vast majority (91%) of those were used to direct a tweet to a specific addressee. While such findings have provided us with general understanding of why and how people use microblogging services, they have not explored the use of new media technologies in specific contexts such as for political communication in developing countries. The 2008 and 2012 presidential elections in the United States of America have shown that Web 2.0 has become an important tool for political communication and persuasion (Towner et al., 2011; Hoffner & Rehkoff 2011, Bimber 2014). Already, politicians in the U.S. are reported to be leading in this

area with Barack Obama being the most prominent example. He was purported to have been able to successfully use social media within his last election campaign to regain the presidency (Bimber 2014). In those elections it became clear that social networking sites particularly, could be successfully adapted to connect, discuss and disseminate important to members and followers of the political parties. Especially young people were inspired to discuss political topics after engaging with their political leaders online and produce their own content (Chen 2009; Kushin & Kitchener 2009).

The development of new media technologies and associated social media has enabled internet users to create content on their own. Using political blogs or discussion forums, people express their opinions, take part in discussions or associate with politically like-minded individuals, minimizing the traditional “gatekeeper” role of journalists (Stieglitz, S.; Brockmann, T. and Dang_Xuan, L. (2012). It has been argued that the diffusion of the usage of social media as well as other factors (e.g. discussion culture, average age and related variables) have a strong impact on the relevance of public internet-based discourses within the political landscape in specific countries (Howard 2006; Papacharissi, 2002; Tewksbury, 2006). Various new media technology platforms and social media such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, blogs and videos on YouTube, through their messages, offer citizens new platforms for sharing information and expressing their opinions both to each other and to their governments (Bureau of International Information Programmes (BIIP) of the United States Department of State, 2012). Thus new media provides an outlet for the world’s populations to interact with their governments.

Globally, the world’s population stands at 7,017,846,922 and internet users stand at 2,405,518, 376 billion (34.28%). Out of this figure, 167, 335, 676 million representing 6.96 % of the users are in Africa. Facebook network has a membership of more than 900 million people while Twitter has more than 500 million users (Forbes, 2012; Stieglitz, Brockmann, and Dang_Xuan, 2012). Young voters spend more time online on social networks such as Facebook or MySpace than watching television or reading newspapers (Stieglitz, Brockmann, and Dang_Xuan, 2012, OECD, 2009). From the perspective of politicians and political parties, new media technologies offer an important avenue to join social media-based political communication in particular during political campaigns. Thus new media technologies with their corresponding associated websites, social media and mobile telephony offer a conducive platform for citizens to engage with political leaders. However, the importance of social media usage by politicians in other countries is not clear. It seems that some politicians are not willing to properly incorporate the use of social media into their daily business (Stieglitz, Brockmann, and Dang_Xuan, 2012). The research field on social media in the political context is relatively young and seems to focus more on the U.S. landscape. Little is known about the relevance of social media for politics in developing countries, particularly Ghana, as well as the factors that account for its successful use for political purposes. Additionally, communication using social media has been typically one way or asynchronous interaction which means that communication is delayed and either party can choose to interact based on their own time schedule. This mode of

communication has to do with their perceived fears of ‘opening the gate’ for attacks from their opponents (Coleman, 2001; Ward, et al., 2006). Thus the Internet has not been fully used to increase interactivity in election campaigns (Gong & Lips, 2009). By implication, it then suggests that current communication strategies employed by political parties might not be robust enough in promoting effective communication between politicians and their followers where the latter can also articulate their concerns for the former to act on them. Various African countries have developed and are implementing ambitious ICT policies all in the move at incorporating these technologies into virtually every aspect of their socio-political lives. However, few if any of these countries are looking at the phenomenon of the use of these technologies from the users perspectives.

Social media, information flow and election campaigns in Ghana

In 2003, the Government of Ghana rolled out its ICT4AD policy, a document that seeks to incorporate ICT and various new media technologies into all aspects of the Ghanaian community. The policy, which is in five phases, is geared at educating and equipping Ghanaians with viable ICT skills and competencies by infusing these new media technologies into education, economics, agriculture, health and governance among other services sectors of the economy (ICT4AD 2003). Currently, it is in its fourth phase, the stage of applying and implementing various ICT-induced programmes and projects. Even though some gains might have accrued from the adoption of new media technologies in the aforementioned sectors of the economy, now more than ever before, the need has arisen to take practical steps to gauge how the citizenry are adopting new media technologies into the daily engagements of their lives. This is against the background that Ghana has appreciably high rates of penetration and subscription of these technologies. Internet access and mobile telephony have become more of a reality for the average Ghanaian who has the means to and can afford mobiles with relative ease (Ahiabenu, 2013). However in terms of the application of new media technologies to politics, records indicate greater use by policy makers, civil society organisations, political actors and their institutions, journalists and the media generally. Often, the media and civil society organisations such as African Elections provide opportunities on social media platforms to engage citizens on elections and other issues making the news. Data on citizens’ use of new media technologies for political communication on elections in Ghana is rather thin.

It is my view that it is time now for attention to be brought to bear on Ghanaians in respect of how they are employing new media technologies and social media especially to engage in political communication with political leaders and their parties. Pivotal issues that need to be interrogated include how political parties and their leadership in an election year in Ghana are articulating the major themes of their manifestoes via their online outlets. What kind of conversation is going on between political leaders and their followers online? What communication strategies are the parties employing to reach out to the citizenry to ensure they

are adequately informed on issues raised in their manifestoes? In as much as it might be argued in some quarters that new media technologies are the preserve of the middle class educated Ghanaian, Internet statistics on Ghana suggest that, almost one out of every two persons owns a mobile or smartphone. Young people within the ages of 18 and 29 years are often seen accessing social media on their phones. Research indicates that digital natives or young people are changing the dynamics of civic engagements. For reasons ranging from time, convenience, accessibility to political actors and a sense of contributing to setting the agenda on civic and political issues, young people are purported to be using new media technologies for social and entertainment purposes. So the question is how do political actors and their parties attract and retain the attention of these digital natives (those born after the invention of computers) and engage with them on politics and elections? How do they engage with them online to build an informed citizenry and get that extra vote, so much needed to win the elections? After all, what a presidential aspirant needs to win elections in Ghana is fifty percent of the votes plus one more. Previous elections results in Ghana, from 2000 to 2012 have shown that differences in total votes obtained by any presidential candidate have often been a few thousands. Thus it is important to examine how salient themes in the manifestoes of the political parties framed online, the angle and tone of these manifestoes as well as online users' responses to the website postings. This also calls for an exploration and understanding of the communication strategy the political parties adopt online through the nature of interactions ensuing between the political parties, their leaders and their followers.

Conclusions

This piece suggests strongly that it is time for political parties to harness the interactive potentials of new media technologies and social media to strategically engage with citizens online because as Castells asserts, they offer citizens and politicians a “most potent political force”. Engagement is likely to nurture a sense of political efficacy in citizens, making them more inclined to vote. For politicians, it will enable them get those extra thousands of votes needed to avoid the ‘second round’ voting sagas beginning to characterize Ghanaian elections in recent times and to secure the fifty percent plus one more vote. A major research along the lines proposed in this essay promises to provide novel information that would fill the existing gap on the use of web 2.0 technologies as tools for political campaigns from a developing country perspective. Consequently, on completion, the results of the ongoing research from which this essay has been derived are expected to greatly benefit political parties, political institutions, civil society organisations, politicians and other stakeholders in the ICT industry in Ghana, Africa and other international groups and organizations interested in the subject, on the myriad of uses to which new media technologies could be harnessed to ensure participatory democracy for development in developing countries. The study will then conclude by recommending further interrogation of this topic to determine how new media technologies can be applied to forge a deeper participatory democracy for Ghana.

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