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RESEARCH

The Twittersphere as Political Engagement Space: A Study of Social Media Usage in Election Campaigns in Nigeria

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This study examines how social media networks are changing the ways party politics and election campaigns are conducted in Nigeria, especially how these technologies are encouraging new ways of wooing voters and engaging ordinary citizens. Specifically, this study focuses on the growing awareness of the use of Twitter for election campaigns and civic engagement between 2012 and 2015. The theoretical framework used in the study adopts approaches from Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA- e.g. Herring 2001, 2004). The data set consists of selected microblogging posts extracted from the Twitter handles of two major political parties and their political candidates. Additional Twitter posts on the election-related issues trending during the period provided supplemental data. The data collection procedures comprised media monitoring and use of computer software packages (e.g. *SketchEngine*, *Topsy*, *AntConc*) for online data harvesting over a period of fourteen months. This method was supplemented with manual downloading using google search. The analytical procedure follows the content analysis of significant textual features and discourse patterns in the online political conversation that sheds light on the persuasive use of technologies as discourse strategy. The study thus highlights the sociality of politics and socio-communicative features of Twitter as a campaign tool to mobilise support and woo voters in an emerging democracy.

Keywords: Twittersphere; social media; tweets; election campaigns; politics; civic engagement

Cette étude examine les moyens dont les réseaux sociaux changent les façons dont on mène la politique de parti et les campagnes électorales au Nigéria, surtout les façons dont ces technologies encouragent de nouvelles manières de séduire des électeurs et d'engager des citoyens ordinaires. Particulièrement, cette étude se focalise sur la sensibilisation croissante de l'usage de Twitter pour les campagnes électorales et pour l'engagement civique entre les années 2012 et 2015. Le cadre théorique

employé dans cette étude suit les approches de la Communication virtuelle (*Computer-Mediated Communication, CMC*) et de l'Analyse de discours virtuelle (*Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis, CMDA*; par exemple Herring 2001, 2004). L'ensemble des données consiste en des publications de blogs sélectionnées venant des pseudonymes sur Twitter (*Twitter handles*) de deux partis politiques majeurs et de leurs candidats politiques. D'autres publications sur Twitter sur les tendances importantes liées aux élections pendant la période ont fourni des données supplémentaires. La collecte des données s'est constituée de la surveillance de médias et de l'usage de logiciels (par exemple *SketchEngine, Topsy, AntConc*) pour la collecte de données en ligne pendant quatorze mois. Nous avons également employé le téléchargement manuel de données en utilisant le moteur de recherche Google. La procédure analytique applique l'analyse de contenu de caractéristiques textuelles importantes et de schémas de discours dans la discussion politique en ligne, ce qui fait la lumière sur l'usage persuasif de technologies comme stratégie de discours. Cette étude met ainsi l'accent sur la socialité de la politique et sur les caractéristiques socio-communicatifs de Twitter comme outil de campagne pour la mobilisation de soutien politique et des électeurs dans une démocratie émergente.

Mots-clés: réseaux sociaux; tweets; campagnes électorales; la politique; engagement civique

Introduction: Social Media and the Reframing of the Political Engagement Space in Nigeria

Since the turn of this millennium, the Internet and social media networks have been opening up new opportunities to energize political participation and civic engagement in advanced and emerging democracies. This new mode of virtual political interaction is creating a new space for accelerated engagements between politicians and citizens in most democratic cultures across the globe. They are particularly effective in encouraging more direct channels of communication between politicians and citizens thereby reducing status and communication gaps. Cab (2017) observes that the increasing use of social media by political parties, advocacy groups and general citizens has provided a new environment for communication and interaction. Scholars (e.g., Zappavigna 2013; Opeibi 2015) now believe that these new media technologies have now made several people across temporal, spatial, cultural and political boundaries more interconnected.

A number of studies have observed that the emerging trends in the proliferation and use of web-based media have serious implications for the growth and stability of democracy in Africa. For example, Batista (2003) argues that Information Communication Technology will invigorate political relations by allowing direct citizen participation in government. These digital technologies will also eliminate unnecessary mediations and help to optimise the representative process and expand participative democracy.

The importance of social media in this political environment has enjoyed greater acceptability following the key role it played during the Arab Spring and its successful deployment during the 2012 Fuel Subsidy protest in Nigeria. Starting from the 2011 electoral cycle, Nigerian politicians are now appropriating this new window of political communication culture in order to set a new political discourse agenda by utilising these online platforms to engage potential voters and ordinary citizens. In the same vein, these politicians are using online platforms as a critical tool to rebrand their political identity and broadcast political messages to a much wider audience online. Because many Nigerians now have access to data services and affordable mobile phones, it has become a lot easier to utilise social media network services to promote virtual interactions and social networking based on political, ideological and professional relationships. Nigerian political actors have now found social media platforms, one of the fastest and most effective ways to mobilise support and woo voters.

The 2015 general elections of the central and federated units in Nigeria was the 5th quadrennial election to be held since the end of military rule in 1999. Nigeria operates a multi-party presidential system. Among the over forty registered political parties in Nigeria during the 2015 general elections, two major political parties, the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) dominated Nigerian political discourses online. Expanding outside of (purely) political websites, social media tools, such as Facebook, Twitter, Mobile Telephone SMS, among others, were incorporated into the campaign tool repertoire. In fact, Mr. Muhammadu Buhari (APC), a latecomer to the digital political, discursive practices also created both personal Twitter and Facebook accounts to promote his presidential ambition. He used the platforms to mobilise support and woo influential and educated voters during the electioneering campaigns.

As shown in **Figure 1**, a number of the political actors are now deploying social media technologies for electioneering campaigns. In fact, all the major political candidates contesting for the presidential and governorship positions now consider strong online presence *a sine qua non* for mobilising support and wooing highly influential and young voters. Candidates are utilising these platforms to mobilise support from home and abroad and to gain political capital. Significantly, the political interactions mediated through web-based technologies have continued to scale up national political narrative and campaign activities.

Twitter was developed in 2006 primarily as a social networking platform to foster interpersonal interactions and relationships among its users. In describing its techno-communicative features, Zappavigna (2011, 790) observes that this microblogging service: “[...] allow users to post character-constrained messages via a range of technologies such as mobile phone, instant messaging clients and the web. Tweets, messages posted to Twitter, are messages presented to a virtual audience who ‘follow’ by subscribing to another user’s feed....”

It is noteworthy that Twitter has now become an important social media tool for political campaigns and civic engagement all over the world. Zappavigna (2013,



Figure 1: Screencast of press report on the use of social media platform by the presidential candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Mr. Muhammadu Buhari.

18) classifies Twitter as microblogging data that is episodic, with posts added to user's stream over time, often at frequent intervals. Marwick and Boyd (2010, 116) sees the near synchronous character of this social media network as "lifestreaming." This suggests that the micro posts are an "ongoing sharing of personal information to a networked audience." Cataldi, di Caro and Schifanella (2010, 2) observe that microblogging produces "time-sensitive text" which narrates and transmits news stories or information.

Graham, Jackson and Broersma (2016, 766) assert that "Twitter has quickly become an important online space for political communication practice because it successfully connects ordinary people to the popular, powerful and influential." Other scholars argue that "its key features make it a potentially fruitful space for developing a more direct relationship between politicians and citizens in a networked environment" (Bruns and Burgess 2011; Graham, Broersma and Hazelhoff 2013 as cited in Graham, Jackson and Broersma 2016).

Although, these scholars have reported that politicians across Western democracies are increasingly embracing Twitter, particularly during election time, the extent to which similar practices occur in developing and or emerging democracies has not been fully explored. This study thus raises that awareness about the gradual deployment of this microblogging service in Nigeria, especially in recent elections. Following the successful use of Twitter for election campaigns and civic engagement in more advanced democracies, Nigerian political actors are now deploying this microblogging technology for purposes beyond private communications and personal social networking services.

Twitter as election campaign tool in Nigeria

Digital tools and infrastructure allow individuals to associate, network, express themselves, and mobilize others at lower cost, larger scale, and greater speed than ever before. As one of the recently developed social media networks, Twitter has become one of the most utilised social media technologies for political activities.

Although the use of Twitter for political purposes is a recent development in Nigeria, the tool is becoming increasingly popular among key political actors and

stakeholders. For instance, the 2015 elections witnessed the rapid deployment of Twitter by the two main political parties, the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and their key candidates. Apart from using Twitter for campaign purposes, political office holders also use the platform to interact with their supporters and to communicate with the general public.

To further buttress the increasing importance of this initiative for political activities in Nigeria, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), now in the opposition, recently announced four (4) new *official multilingual Twitter accounts*. These are @PDPHausa, @PDPIgbo, @PDPYoruba and @PDPPidgin. This development reaffirms the benefits of the new technology in wooing voters through what Giles and Smith (1979, 6) refers to as "language accommodation strategy." It also shows that these politicians understand the importance of the nation's multilingual setting and are beginning to harness this discourse strategy for improved political discourse through multilingual Twitter platforms. It is believed that the use of these multilingual communicative tools will widen the party support base and increase its online followership from these major language groups in Nigeria. It is suggested that the new Twitter accounts will be used to also engage and sensitise citizens on the current state of the nation as well as to provide effective opposition. By challenging the ruling party through these multilateral communicative channels, the party hopes to regain the presidency in the upcoming 2019 general elections.

Hashtags as communicative strategy

One significant digital tool on Twittersphere is the provision of hashtags which have now become a useful discourse strategy. This unique techno-communicative affordance has become a useful tool for political purposes. As a critical socio-technical feature of Twitter, hashtags are increasingly being used to monitor and transmit current events, topics, issues and trending messages globally.

Within the Nigerian socio-political milieu, trending topics transmitted via hashtags are a key socio-communicative and technical affordance that Twitter

offers its users. Hashtags are described as “a list of the latest keywords occurring with high frequency in current posts, displayed under the search box. These trends are not long-term patterns, instead, trending topics emphasise immediacy” (Zappavigna 2013, 18). Macale (2011) says, “Twitter’s Trending Topics algorithm identifies topics that are immediately popular, rather than topics that have been popular for a while or on a daily basis, to help people discover the ‘most breaking’ news stories from across the world... popular key words and phrases mentioned in tweets consistently.”

These trending topics on Twittersphere are often acronymized, coined, clipped, lexicalized or shortened to accommodate the technical features of the platform. The currency of the topic for easy broadcast and rebroadcast is often prefixed with the hashtag symbol (#). In 2015, the Nigerian Twittersphere transmitted the following hashtags #NigeriaDecides, #LagosDecides, #VoteGEJ, #VotePDP, #SupportAPC among several others. Over 100 hashtags were created during the 2015 elections in Nigeria. Both the active political actors and their supporters coined a range of trending topics to transmit political messages, images, and tweets about the elections, campaign activities, and party manifestos. This social media platform was also used for electoral monitoring during the elections. Citizens used their mobile phones to broadcast, and retweet, voting activities, movement of electoral materials and staff, security situations at polling centres as well as results from polling units. Real images and pictures were uploaded in real-time. Some experts and observers, therefore, believe that these technologies played a critical role in enhancing the credibility and transparency of the 2015 electoral cycle.

It is worthy of note that the use of Twitter, as a social media platform, has now been integrated into Nigerian political discourse mechanisms as a critical tool for wooing voters and engaging citizens. It is used to perform a range of politically-related activities such as electioneering campaigns, image branding, special identity-laundering, voters identification strategy, crowdsourcing, as an electoral marketing platform, as an interactive platform to post comments and respond to queries from

online users, connecting followers, supporters and ordinary citizens; and increasing participation in the global discourse.

Theoretical issues

The general opinion of most experts is that new media discourse largely falls within the realm of study focused on the interactions between human and some computer-based machine or equipment. New media also deals with how these technology-based interactions produce strings of information transmitted between and among individuals or groups separated by time and distance but interconnected via web-based platforms. Herring's (2001) description of this phenomenon as computer-mediated communication (CMC) offers deeper insights into how these new technologies are impacting modern social and communication practices.

According to Herring, CMC is conceptualised as predominantly text-based human-to-human interaction mediated by networked computers or mobile telephony, which includes, email, asynchronous discussion boards, blogs and wikis (Herring 2001, 614). CMC is believed to have the potential to promote interactivity and can help to create social meaning through virtual networks. As a critical component of CMC, social media platforms are believed to have the capacity to increase the efficiency of an organisation (e.g. a political party) by providing tools and channels to reach more people quickly, to transmit and process information faster and to receive immediate feedback. When utilised for political purposes, it may also encourage electronic democracy and help in challenging hierarchies by descaling top-down formal relationships and by promoting participatory political engagements.

Within the context of this study, CMC provides the toolkits to study and explain how new media technologies influence the strategies in which political actors within the Nigerian public sphere communicate their political messages and engage a wide range of audience through a range of virtual protocols. By applying discourse-based methodological and analytical frameworks that combine resources from CMC and Discourse Analysis (DA), this study demonstrates how social media tools play critical roles in reshaping public discourses and reinvigorating democratic process. Herring's (2013, 21) notion of Convergent Media Computer-mediated discourse (CMCMD)

further illuminates her insight in earlier works. CMCMD particularly focuses on language, communication, conversation, social interaction, and media coactivity as they occur online (including via mobile phones), with collaboration on the periphery. It leaves out non-interactive content within the scope of this model. This profound theoretical construct on language use within the digital space has continued to underpin works in social media discourse.

Methodological considerations

A substantial amount of extracts used in this study relied on data deposited on the online repository of an ongoing digital humanities project at the University of Lagos titled: Corpus of Nigeria New Media Discourse in English (CONNMDE). Specifically, I collected posts (tweets), images and retweets from the Twitter accounts of key political stakeholders from the two major political parties in Nigeria. The ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the main opposition, the All Progressives Congress (APC) respectively enjoyed some significant online presence, mentions and traffic between 2013 and 2015.

The data was subjected to qualitative content analysis to discuss how the use of language on these online platforms provides useful insights on the discourse strategies adopted by the political actors and stakeholders. The analysis of the data throws more light on how the use of new media technologies promotes civic engagement and enhances the campaign for a credible electoral process and participatory democracy in Nigeria.

Virtual political marketing of incumbency for political gains

As of the 2015 electoral year, the ruling party, PDP, had ruled Nigeria for fifteen years while the incumbent president, Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan had been in power for six years. Using the privilege and power of incumbency, the party and its candidate utilised the cyberspace as a platform to report their achievements and solicit further support to retain political power at the federal level.

The online political campaign battles were basically between the party in power (i.e. PDP) and its presidential candidate, Dr Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, and the opposition party, the All Progressives Congress (APC) and its candidate, Mr.

Muhammadu Buhari. Both parties and their candidates developed their online campaign strategies by creating and hosting well-designed functional websites, two social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, as well as other minor online protocols. The use of Twitter became increasingly pivotal in their campaign strategies.

As the 2015 electioneering campaigns gained serious momentum, the online campaigns increased significantly. For example, the achievements of the ruling party and its presidential candidate were regularly posted on online platforms including the Twitter accounts of the party and the candidate. Twitter handles were increasingly being used to engage the citizens and mobilise them to support the candidates.

Figure 2 shows how president Jonathan uses a post for (i) civic engagement and (ii) to covertly solicit future support. Indirectness as a communicative act is a socio-cultural discourse feature based on presupposition. The passport size portrait picture of the candidate with a smiling face and relaxed mien suggests a semiotic thrust that communicates a message of optimism, friendliness and commitment to implement the electoral promise. In the lower section of the post, two slogans often accompany the tweets: *Goodluck for Transformation; The Transformer*. This political

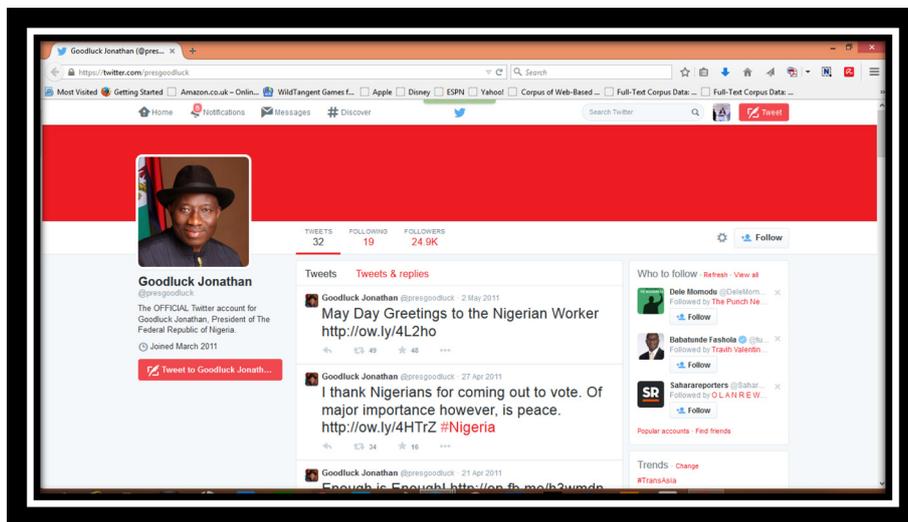


Figure 2: Screenshot from the Twitter handle of president Goodluck Ebele Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as of May 2014.

sloganeering as a key property of political campaign discourse was fully exploited in the online campaigns.

It can also be observed that many of the Twitter accounts of the key political figures especially the president, also exhibit some conventional architecture of a typical Twittersphere. In addition to the graphics, the Twitter account is also used for the following: (i) to broadcast and transmit political campaign messages, images and pictures; (ii) to disseminate information about national and international news stories especially “breaking news” (iii) to provide a platform for citizens’ engagement outside the localised traditional non-virtual town-hall space (iv) as a platform for publishing performance and achievement scorecards of the party and the candidate, and (v) as a political discourse tool to attack the oppositions. Some of these functions are also found in the Twitter account of Mr. Muhammadu Buhari, the opposition candidate (see **Figure 3**).

The screencast shows the presidential candidate of the APC using his Twitter account to connect with supporters, followers and the range of online users who are influential citizens and active users of new media that can help to mobilise potential voters who may not be active users of social media networks. The platform was used



Figure 3: Screencast showing the homepage of the Twitter handle of Mr. Muhammadu Buhari, the presidential candidate of the APC, extracted during the 2015 presidential election campaign (February 2015).

to broadcast campaign messages, videos, pictures and information on the candidate, his party, the election and the state of the Nigerian nation. These materials were regularly shared, tweeted and retweeted by the candidate and his followers. Online users, visitors and other citizens who were Twitter account holders were able to access the information via their handheld mobile devices equally. Around March the following information 787 Tweets, 33 Following, 102k Followers, and 12 Retweets. extracted from his Twitter handle, gives a picture of the activities on the platform. As the day of the election drew closer, the platform witnessed higher traffic which increased the number of posts and retweets.

Twittering for electoral credibility and support

Beyond using Twitter as a political communication tool, Nigerian political actors and stakeholders have devised other creative ways to use this microblogging platform. For instance, politicians now utilise the platform to enhance the credibility of the electoral process. For instance, during the presidential primaries conducted by the then opposition party (APC) Twitter was deployed to electoral monitoring and management purposes. The party official Twitter account was used to report and transmit the moment-by-moment activities in real-time during the event. This was done to enhance the credibility and integrity of the electoral process and to demonstrate the party's respect for internal democracy and transparency during the exercise. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other government agencies also used Twitter before and during the elections.

Figures 4 and 5 from the Twitter handle of the All Progressives Congress (APC), show some aspect of the moment by moment reporting of the event during their presidential primaries held in December 2014 in Lagos, Nigeria. Party supporters at the venue of the exercise were posting updates on the primaries which were accessible to other supporters and followers who also were retweeting the updates. The mini-synchronous nature of the Twitter conversation and chats as the events were unfolding at the venue improved the transparent rating and the credibility of the process. Before the end of the exercise, it was easy to predict the eventual winner as the vote counting period was strictly monitored and posted online (tweeted at intervals).

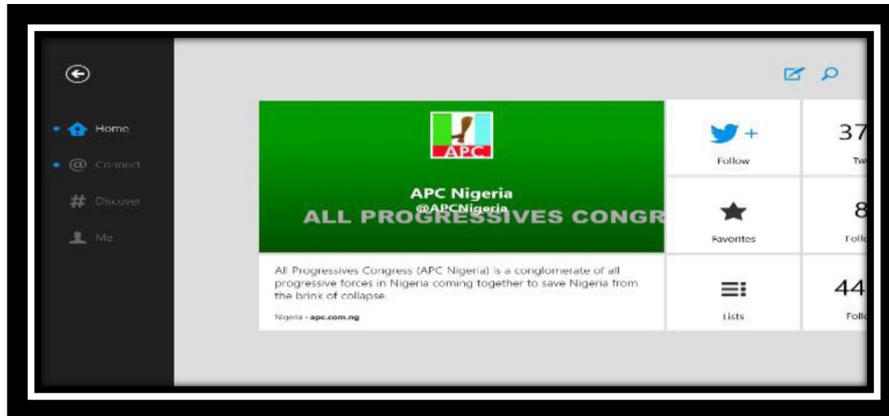


Figure 4: Screencast extracted from the Twitter account of the All Progressives Congress (APC) during their presidential primaries in December 2014.

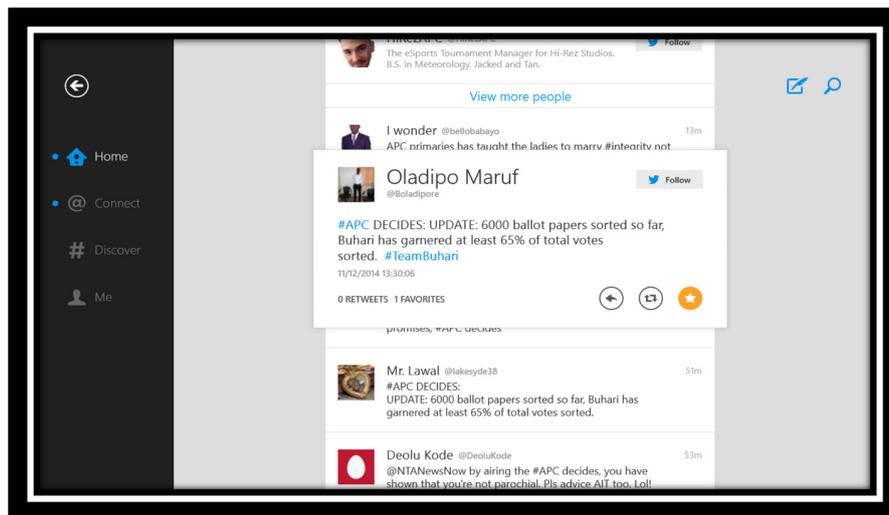


Figure 5: Screencast extracted from the Twitter account of the All Progressives Congress (APC) during their presidential primaries in December 2014.

The party thus used this electoral monitoring exercise via this online platform to convince the citizens about their capacity to conduct credible and transparent national elections and consequently to run a transparent, credible and participatory government when voted into power. On the flip side, by using this online media monitoring strategy, the party indirectly condemned a similar process by the ruling party. At PDP’s event, their candidate, the incumbent president, was merely

handpicked (“anointed” as known in Nigerian political discourse) by some party leaders and rubber stamped by the party without any competitive, transparent and credible primaries.

Figure 6 shows an improved usage of the platform in 2017 during a regional election in Southeast Nigeria. The post carries the real image of the electoral process and detailed information about the venue and time of the poll. The message suggests an alleged electoral fraud that an agent of the ruling party, APC is trying to perpetrate. By tweeting the image of the incident, PDP is trying to play the role of a political whistle-blower. One, the party subtly indicts the ruling party of electoral fraud, and two, it tries to prevent the fraud by exposing the act through the social media network so that the appropriate government agencies can take necessary action. What is significant in the text is the power of



Figure 6: Screenshot extracted from the Twitter account of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) during a regional election in Anambra State, South East, Nigeria (November 2017).

the online platform to monitor and expose electoral malpractice and to promote transparency.

In a similar vein, **Figure 7** represents another electoral credibility function to which Twitter has been put. Mr. Buhari, the candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC), is seen at the polls using new technology to verify his voting card.

At the second level, he uses the post to encourage voters to come and perform their rights to choose their preferred candidate during the presidential election. It is significant to notice the use of metaphor to drive home this message. The use of the metaphor of a journey is noticed in the post- *A step towards the journey begins*. The literature on political discourse (Beard 2000; Gastil 1992) has identified the use of a range of metaphors as a critical discursive feature in election campaign speeches and advertisements. In fact, within the Nigerian political discourse context, a number of instances of these metaphors has been studied (e.g. Opeibi 2009). Interestingly this discourse strategy hitherto confined to offline political discursive settings has now been migrated to online platforms. This may confirm the argument that both offline and online political discourses enjoy some interacting mutual influences and



Figure 7: Screenshot from the Twitter handle of Mr. Muhammadu Buhari during the presidential election in March 2015.

similarities. Political discursive practices thus exhibit similar features irrespective of the channel or platform.

Retweeting for crowdsourcing and online support

The retweet feature is a significant component of social media affordances on the Twitter platform. While the number of texts may be limited to 140 characters, retweets have become one political campaign tool that politicians and their supporters appropriate to woo undecided voters and win more support. A retweet is a post or message that originates from the source and is re-broadcasted or retransmitted by followers of the owner of the Twitter account. The recursive nature of retweets makes them an effective political advertising device. In the following example, the tweet of one of the governorship candidates in the Northern part of Nigeria, Adamawa State, Mr. Nuhu Ribadu was retweeted by some of his followers.

It is important to notice the key message of his campaign manifesto in the retweets. The Twittersphere allows cross-message coherence and additional meaning creation that may be transmitted through retweets. The inclusion of a previous message in a new message sometimes with additional comments can spread both the sentiments expressed in the original tweet as well as the support of the retweeter for the message (Herring 2013, 11).

Two online users, Fidelis Mbah and Abdulmalik A. Ismail retweeted a message from Nuhu Ribadu's handle account-@NuhuRibadu. "My vision is to make #AdamawaState a model of governance and infrastructural development in Nigeria by the year 2019..." The discursive import of the campaign promise is transmitted far beyond the borders of the small location in the North of Nigeria. The globalisation of the message has the potential of attracting supporters for the candidate. **Figures 8** and **9** are screencasts generated online through a Topsy application on the search for the keyword, "Good Governance."

In the extract from one Francis Mbah (**Figure 10**), as shown in **Figure 9** is a retweet from Nuhu Ribadu in **Figure 8**. This strategy serves to promote the key political programme of Mr Nuhu Ribadu, one of the candidates for the governorship election in Adamawa State in the Northern part of the

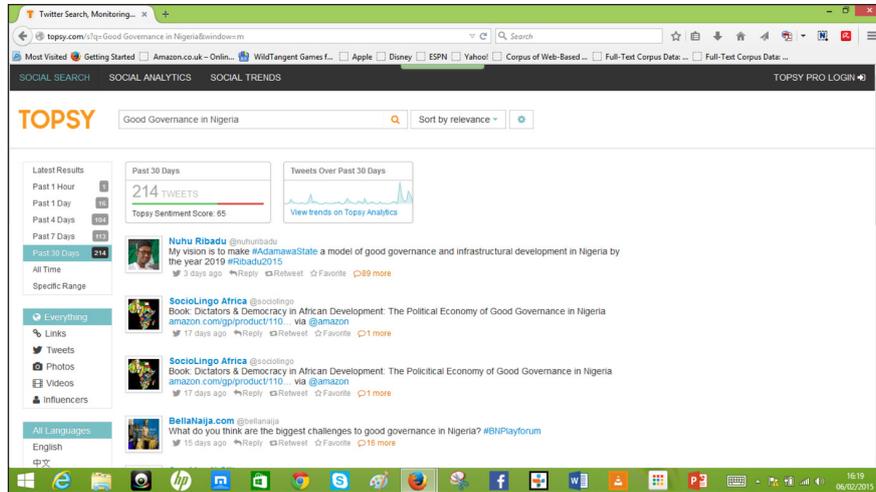


Figure 8: Screencast on the web search on “good governance” using *Topsy* (November 2014).

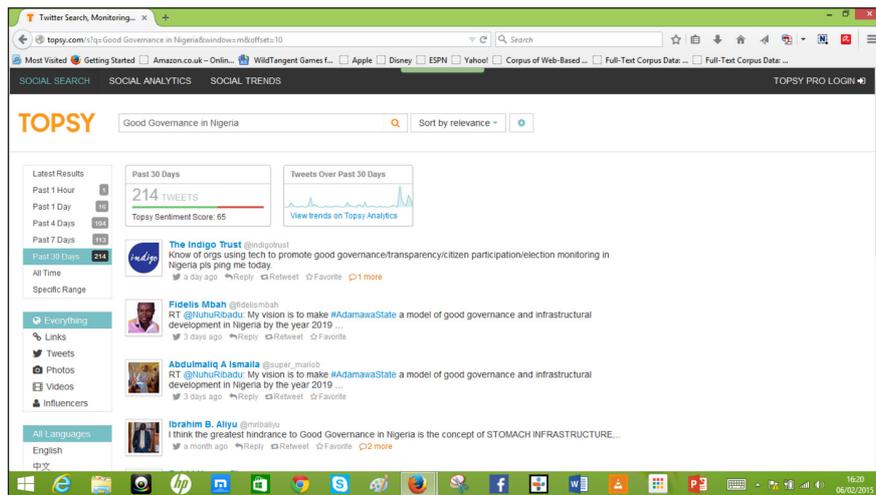


Figure 9: Screencast on the web search on “good governance” using *Topsy* (November 2014).



Figure 10: A retweet from Mr. Fidelis Mbah in support of Mr. Nuhu Ribadu, a governorship candidate in the Northern part of Nigeria.

country in 2015. The posts provide a strong cross-cultural and cross-linguistic support for the candidate because Mbah is of the Igbo extraction. The post also demonstrates the popularity and national acceptance of Mr. Ribadu. The candidate himself, a former national chairman of the financial crime commission, earned his national reputation as a successful anti-corruption campaigner. The support from another region thus provides the necessary social capital for his ambition. The use of Twitter has thus been able to create a democratised space to transmit local and national political programmes and issues in Nigeria.

Figure 11 extracted from **Figure 8** shows a post from an Ibrahim B. Aliyu reacting to the concept of stomach infrastructure which he argues is another cover for corruption as it will hinder good governance in Nigeria. He mobilises support for good governance by condemning stomach infrastructure mentality.

Tweeting for identity branding

Political actors across the globe use media platforms to construct their political and personal identities in a manner that will appeal to voters. Nigerian politicians at the state levels have now begun to use online channels to (re)construct and (re)brand their personality profile in order to crowdsource and mobilise followership. For instance, during the 2015 governorship election in Lagos, the economic capital of Nigeria, the candidates of the two leading political parties, the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) and the challenger, People's Democratic Party (PDP) deployed Twitter to complement their traditional media campaigns. Screencast from their Twitter handles show the increased awareness of the potential of social media among the ruling political elite in Nigeria. In **Figure 12** below, Mr. Akinwunmi Ambode, the

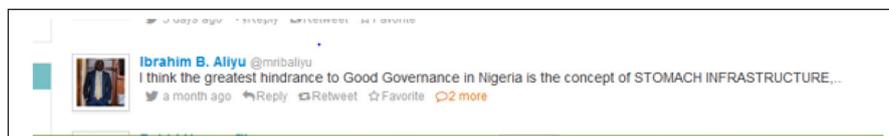


Figure 11: A retweet from Mr. Ibrahim B. Aliyu on the new lexicon, “Stomach Infrastructure” that has gained some currency in Nigerian democratic space since 2014 when it was first coined.



Figure 12: Screencast of Mr. Akinwunmi Ambode's Twitter homepage (April 2015).

candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC) used his Twitter platform extensively to project his image, flaunt his credentials as the best candidate and to solicit votes.

In the post titled "LET MY EXPERIENCE WORK FOR YOU," the candidate presents his previous academic and work experience in Lagos State as one of his strongest weapons to succeed as the next governor of the state. There is a subtle attack on the credentials of Mr Agbaje, his rival candidate from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) who has never held any public office in the state. The admixture of text, colour and image in the post signifies a persuasive semiotic visual attraction to complement the political message. As a typical political advertising text, the graphological attraction of the twitter post catches the attention of the readers and communicates the message in a brief but strong persuasive sense, reinforced with attractive visual text. The post was retweeted several times by his followers.

Mr. Ambode's tweet above may also be viewed as a case of leveraging Ethical Persuasion to gain power. Aristotle (1962, 15) argues that political candidates utilise persuasive ethical strategy in campaigns to achieve electoral success. The ethical strategy is acknowledged as the most important rhetorical device in political campaigns. There are three factors of the ethical argument that characterise most political campaign talk. These are good sense, goodwill and

good moral character (Opeibi 2009, 47) Basically, this strategy relies on the use of a candidate's integrity, sincerity of purpose, records of achievements or good character, and his capacity to fulfil electoral promises etc. as the selling point. Cockcroft and Cockcroft (1992) refer to this technique as persuasion through personality and stance. Mr. Ambode is the former accountant-general in the Lagos state civil service. He has been regarded as one of the most successful professionals to hold that office. As shown in the post, his impressive records of illustrious service, integrity and hard work are now being flaunted as campaign message to woo voters through this online platform.

Reframing and online mediatizing of local politics via Twitter

Beyond playing the usual traditional function as a channel for identity construction and mobilising during election campaigns, Twitter is also being used to externalise local politics and communicate social meaning. This discourse strategy came to the fore during a 2014 regional governorship election in Ekiti, in Southwest state in Nigeria. The campaign produced a political lexicon (Stomach Infrastructure) that became popularised through Twitter. One of the aspirants, Mr. Ayodele Fayose, the candidate of PDP, coined the term, "Stomach Infrastructure" to describe his commitment to the welfare of the poor as a critical component of his campaign promises. According to him, he plans to provide affordable economic and social welfare programmes for the poor and the needy. As a mark of his seriousness food items such as rice, milk, salt as well as kerosene (a flammable liquid which is used in many homes of low-income earners as a fuel for light and cooking in Nigeria), were distributed during his campaigns. The term was hashtagged and transmitted as a trending topic during and after the election. One interesting outcome of the impact of social media was the reconstruction of the term with extended meanings. For instance, his political opponents re-interpreted the term to mean "corruption," "treasury looting" and "electoral fraud." They argue that any form of inducement during campaign season is unconstitutional. **Figures 13, 14 and 15** show tweets and retweets processed as key word through three applications (Twittcorp, AntConc and Topsy).



Figure 13: Screenshot of Concordancing Twitter search on “Stomach Infrastructure/#Ekiti Election” (July 2014) processed on *Twittcorp*.

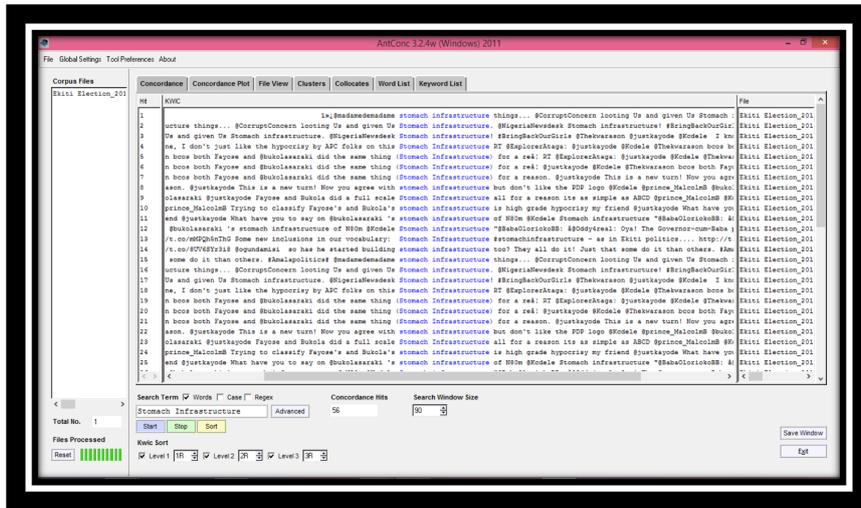


Figure 14: Screenshot of Concordancing Twitter search on “Stomach Infrastructure/#Ekiti Election” (July 2014) processed on *AntConc3.4*.

Political tweets as rhetorical devices

The Nigerian political eco-social sphere as contested site for electoral victory is projected in the posts. The political actors employ linguistic and rhetorical devices to

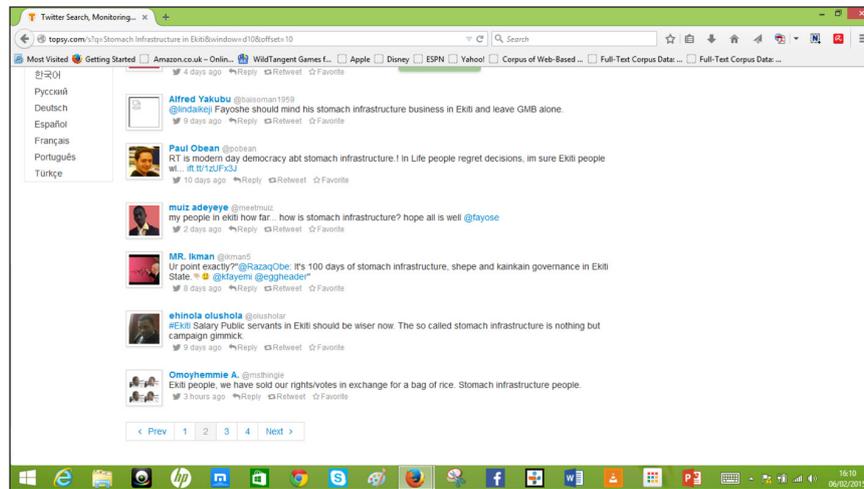


Figure 15: Screencast of Web search on “Stomach Infrastructure/#Ekiti Election” (July 2014) processed via *Topsy* (Nov 2014).

control and communicate political messages with the aim of winning support at all cost. Twitter has emerged as an additional channel to accomplish this objective. Some features of rhetoric to encode social meanings and persuasive goals are expressed in some of the posts. A few of these are illustrated in the following sub-sections.

Tweets as politics of “saints and demons”

Beard (2000) describes the use of negative advertisements during political campaigns as “saints and demons” politics. In the process of attacking an opponent, politicians may twist a well-intentioned policy to attack the opponent. From the tweets and retweets on “Stomach Infrastructure” proposed by Mr. Fayose, his political opponents re-interpret the meaning to convey a different sense not intended in the original meaning. Stomach Infrastructure as discourse token is made to carry extended social meanings within the context of the discourse. It is interesting to observe the sense of caustic humour in the tweets by two citizens, Mr. Omoyhemmie A and Mr. Uche in **Figure 16**. They suggest that the “stomach infrastructure” by Mr. Fayose is nothing more than electoral fraud. The subtle attack on the people of the state is also noticed in the posts. In **Figure 17** we see that the people are accused of selling their voting rights for material and pecuniary benefits (“a bag of rice,” “24 cups of rice”).

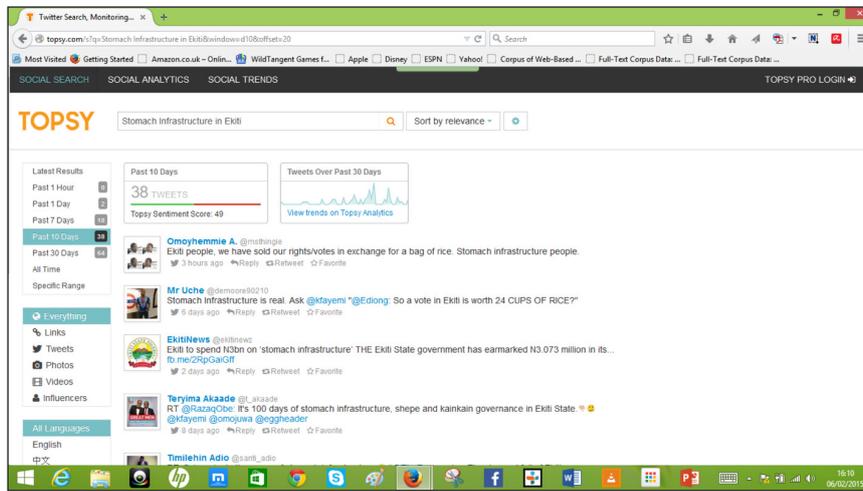


Figure 16: Screencast of Concordancing Twitter search on “Stomach Infrastructure/#Ekiti Election” (July 2014) processed on *AntConc3.4*.



Figure 17: Extracted from Figure 16.

The connection between “stomach” and “rice” is played up subtly and creatively to condemn the lack of sincerity and genuine commitment of elected officials to discharge their constitutional duties in providing real social infrastructure that will improve the well-being of the citizens in the country.

Acronyms as online political advertising device

It is interesting to find how offline discourse strategy is deployed in online platforms. Acronyms usually play a key role in conventional political campaign materials. Political adverts rely on acronymized items to describe and “summarise” key items, words and letters and features about the candidates, parties, programmes and topics.

The use of acronyms such as GMB (General Muhammadu Buhari) for the presidential candidate of the APC and GEJ (Goodluck Ebele Jonathan) for that of the

PDP respectively is meant to serve as an attention getter, to enhance memorability and to assign a unique symbolic status and identity to the candidates. The persuasive implication of this discourse strategy is to elicit more interest in the candidates by referring to them through the acronyms. Although the use of acronyms is a traditional persuasive strategy, it has now been migrated to online platforms as hashtags that trended during the campaigns. What is more significant is the specific online branding of the acronymized items usually prefixed by Twitter hashtag. It is common to find #GEJ, #GMB, #APC, #PDP among others being used as information and communication strategy to attract and woo the voters. In fact, a number of these acronymized hashtags found their ways into campaign materials that were published in the mainstream media.

Neologisms as social meaning

Concrete and unusual word formation practices such as holophrastic construction (HC) (Kovyneva 2013, 169) are deployed in political discourse to provide context-based meaning to new words that are formed and used during campaign seasons. Neologisms are invented words that name new things and processes. It is a creative way of describing experiences and events that are sometimes triggered by unexpected circumstances and phenomena. They may serve as a linguistic compensatory device to respond in a creative way to lack of existing expression or word to describe the new event or process. The case of “stomach infrastructure” as highlighted in this study appears to be in response to the prevalent social welfare deficit within the political space in that region. Ekiti State Nigeria is known to be one of the poorest states in Nigeria due to lack of economic opportunities that can create jobs and employment for the citizens. The coinage of “stomach infrastructure” seems to be a soft-sell political message as a timely economic intervention to the long-awaited social and economic benefits that people had longed for since 1999 when democracy was fully restored.

Hashtags as persuasion

The hashtags also function as a socio-technical device to communicate political message faster and more widely. As reported in literature, it is found that in the

course of the election season, hashtags as technical symbols were used to initiate and transmit discussions, stories, national or global events, incidence, information or messages that were trending. Twitter users transmitted the hashtags to express their support/disapproval of the messages being circulated. The hashtag is often followed by the comments/reactions of the online user/follower of the original message creator. Examples from the APC twitter platform includes: #APCDecides, #TeamBuhari, #Change, #VoteforChange, #GMB. The ruling PDP also used hashtags such as #GEJ, #Transformation, and #Continuity. These hashtags sometimes represent the ideological position of the party or the policy thrust, agenda and manifesto the political party wishes to execute.

The intertextuality thrust in #TeamBuhari is quite significant. It represents the notion of a sports team that is determined to win a race. This is not surprising as metaphors of sport are usually deployed in political discourse (Opeibi 2009). The hashtag #Change represents the slogan of the opposition party who campaigns with the slogan of "Change." They promised a new team of political office holders that will change the manner and mode of governance misused and mismanaged by the ruling party (PDP) which they accused of corruption and gross mismanagement of the economy.

Hashtags as sloganeering strategy

Slogans are a key component of political advertising strategy. They usually carry the message and the brands that the political actor wishes to communicate to the supporters and the general public. They are crafted in crisp, short and persuasive lexico-grammatical items that attract attention and enhance memorability. Lu (1999, 492) observes that "slogans are used as instruments of popular persuasion in advertising and political campaigns. They are perceived "as a means of focusing attention and exhorting to action...." (Urdang and Robbins 1984,17 as cited by Lu 1999). Popular hashtags that dominated the online campaigns sphere during the 2015 general elections included the following: #APCDecides, #TeamBuhari, #Change, #VoteforChange, #GMB, #CONTINUITY, #PDP, #VotePDP, #SupportTransformation, #VoteGEJ.

Beyond using hashtags to trend popular topics and political campaign messages, the increasing use of Twitter within the Nigerian political space is also transforming hashtags into slogans for informative and persuasive purposes. The political actors now use the hashtags as slogans to advertise the candidates and what they represent or promised to offer. It is common to find now these online hashtags transferred to political posters used for offline campaigns or adverts in national newspapers. In some of the figures presented above, the hashtags are deliberately positioned to occupy a conspicuous position as attention getters and message branding strategy.

Naming conventions

Gastil (1992, 486) identifies a range of meaning that naming conventions serve in political discourse. One of such discursive practices used in narrowing power relationship has now been transferred into online platforms. Naming conventions are used to reflect differences in perceived or desired power which may increase the use of different ways to describe the political actors. The use of acronyms in text, for instance, demonstrates how political candidates attempt to narrow power differentials between them and the voters. By using acronyms of the presidential candidates such as GMB, GEJ, or their first names, e.g. "Buhari," "Jonathan," the candidates tend to promote a less formal political interaction and encourage inclusive conversation between them and their supporters. The practice also tends to redefine the political relationship between candidates for the highest office in the land and ordinary citizens in a highly gerontocratic cultural context.

Mediatizing trending topics

Mediatizing local and international conversation through the social media channel has become one of the most important functions of Twitter. It thus takes up the informative and civilising role previously confined within the mainstream media. A careful study of the posts on the handles of some of these politicians reveals that important national and international issues are transmitted to their followers and retweeted by these followers.

In **Figure 18**, some important information on local politics in Niger and Lagos States is now made available not only to the citizens at home but also to the global

community. One Linda Ekeji retweets a post “I will rather resign from politics than defect to APC” as a post from the #CONTINUITY account. It was a statement credited to the governor of a state (Niger state) in the Northern part of the country controlled by the ruling PDP.

The second post (**Figure 19**), from one Tolutayo is also a retweet from #CONTINUITY. It contains a message in support of the governorship candidate of APC in Lagos, Mr. Akinwunmi Ambode. The third-party comment from an influential person in the society that is referenced here can influence some undecided voters.

Several followers of the original owner of the handle as well as the chains of Twitter users now have access to the information which may, in turn, influence their decision or encourage them to persuade others within their spheres of influence to act in a particular way.

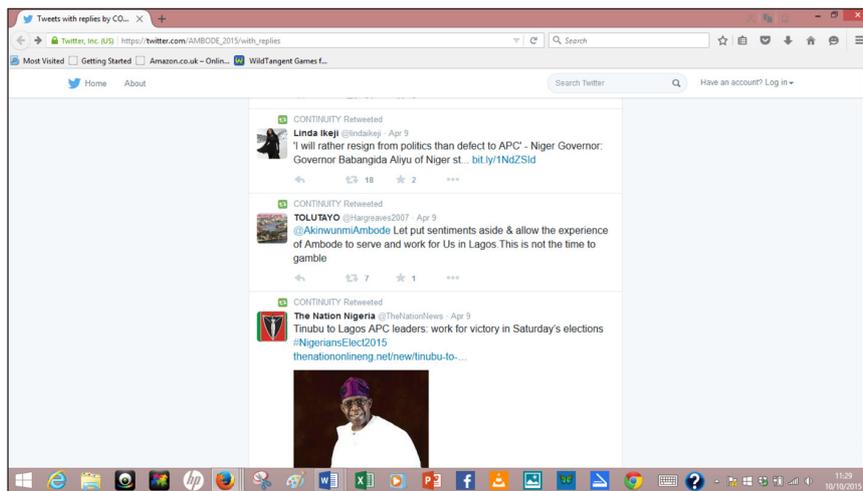


Figure 18: Screencast showing results from the web search on the 2015 general elections via *Topsy* (April 2015).



Figure 19: Extracted from Figure 18.

In **Figure 20**, the original post/message from Mr. Tinubu, a national leader of the APC was retweeted by the #CONTINUITY account and made available online through the Twitter account of the Nation newspaper, @TheNationNews on April 9, 2015. The role of the online presence of mainstream media thus further amplifies messages and posts emanating from the several Twitter accounts developed for political activities during the period.

Metaphor for political rebranding

The reconceptualization of extant political ideology is demonstrated in the creation and use of “stomach infrastructure” as a metaphor of food and social welfare. The candidate originally belongs to a conservative party known for its far-right ideology. However, in the context of his local political environment, he uses the new concept to distance himself from his party by adopting a more liberal and welfarist program. He thus put forward a political programme that focuses on the economic welfare of the local people. The rebranding of his own political agenda introduces a fresh dimension to online political campaign practice in Nigeria.

The emerging trend in the Nigerian online political discursive practices on the Twitter handles of politicians and political parties confirms the earlier observation that web-based platforms have enlarged the civic engagement space in Nigeria. Some of the posts on the twitter handles of the political actors are retweets of national and global discussions. It thus reaffirms the power of social media in promoting the global village phenomenon initiated by the internet age.

One may further argue that social media may not necessarily decide the outcome of any election, but it can provide the direction to which the results may swing. One may suggest that these new technologies can reduce post-election tension and political violence since the results are monitored in real time by all the stakeholders,



Figure 20: Extracted from Figure 18.

and the outcome may be predicted easily based on the online performance of the candidates. So, to a large extent, new media can help to predict the outcome of an election and thus promote credibility and transparency.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Twitter is gradually becoming one of the social media tools that is influencing how online political communication practices now impact the ways political actors interact with citizens in Nigeria. Within the framework of an emerging democracy, the study has provided a fresh understanding of the role of social media tools in enhancing participatory democracy and sociality of political activities.

Arguably, these new technologies may have begun to do the following: (i) create an enlarged space for intensive and productive civic engagement and deliberative democracy (ii) provide the opportunity to globalize national and local political issues (iii) encourage creative and innovative political discourse strategies (iv) deliver electronic power to reach large audiences separated by time and space, in real time, and (v) allow the emergence of new concepts, new words, new expressions that may lead to the emergence of new varieties of web-based Nigerian English (Nigerian New Media English).

One additional distinctive feature that has emerged from the online political campaigns discourse is the integration of the three traditional domains of communication (production, transmission, and reception) on a single virtual media platform. The Twittersphere now provides a form of interactive space that now makes online users both producers and consumers of online contents. These social media channels are increasingly influencing political engagement and encouraging interactions between political actors and the citizens in Nigeria.

With increased interactive political activities and civic engagement via online platforms, web-based political activities hold a lot of promise for the development of a strong participatory democracy in Nigeria. The study equally anticipates the use of social media as a more creative platform for language innovations among Nigerian

internet users. It thus aligns with the position of some scholars that new media technologies are increasingly influencing language use and discourse features due to “specific technological features now associated with the production of texts within social media” (Demata 2017).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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