

The Nexus between Social Media Expressions, Political Participation and Nation Building in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

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Abstract: - More than over half a century preceding the attainment of independence in Nigeria, the concept of nation building still dominates developmental, political and policy discourse in the polity. The ability of underlying ethnicities and nationalities to shun ethno-nationalism remains a near impossible task. However, the advent of social media and the growth of techno-culture revolutionised social cohesion. The high risk associated with political participant and its expensive nature has been replaced by a more cost effective and all encompassing medium. The study opines while the debate as to the existence of a correlation between social media expression and offline political participation is on-going. Social media has affected political apathy, fostered participation and created a homogenized platform for citizens. Further claiming that social media embodies the rudimental potential to set into motion an alternative process to nation building driven by techno-culture.

Keywords: Political Participation, Nation Building, Online Expressions, Offline Participation and New Media.

I. INTRODUCTION

“National consciousness is nothing but a crude, empty fragile shell. The cracks in it explain how easy it is for young independent countries to switch back from nation to ethnic group and from state to tribe, a regression which is terribly detrimental and prejudicial to the development of the nation and national unity.” Frantz Fanon, (1963, p. XV).

Nigeria like a better part of the colonized world has largely remained unsuccessful in their numerous attempts to build nations off the arbitrary post-colonial states. Six decades preceding independence the region is marred with socio-political and economic challenges, ethnic antagonism, civil wars and a society fragmented by numerous social cleavages. More than often, political entrepreneurs mobilize support through integrative oriented manifestos and campaign slogans. While the term nation-building has been in use for centuries, it remains without precision as to what it entails. There also lies the tendency to interchangeably appropriate it with state-building or formation. While state building premises on practicalities, nation-building revolves around character formation and nature of social cohesion between state and society. Another major variation abounds in actors or agents, for state-building certain exogenous forces tend to compliment the efforts of internal agents, while state-building

under normal circumstances, little or no audience is provided for external interventions. In contemporary societies nation-building abstractly entails concerted conscious efforts geared towards the creation of a sense of homogeneity within an aspiring or established political community. Besides attempting to establish politically autonomous societies, nation building also encompasses institution of administrative, coercive, extractive and legal apparatus of a territorially defined entity.

Variations in the usage of the term could also be associated with contextual dimensions and numerous policies aimed at either of the variable in focus across time and space. In the early periods of state building in contemporary Europe, France and Italy consciously adopted certain policies geared towards building a common identity amongst the populace. While in the less advanced societies, nations emerged under a different trajectory. Against this, the study posits the manner in which states came to be has defining impact on the course of nation building approach they are likely to adopt. For example, Nigeria is faced with the unending attempts at establishing supra-national identities void of ethnic or regional fragmentations. Like most heterogeneous states, Nigeria has fallen short of homogenising various ethnicities and nationalities. The un-easy relationship that abounds within the Nigerian polity has at its peak led to a war civil, emergence of separatist movements and incessant ethno-religious conflicts.

Nationalism which served as a homogenising agent against colonial administration soon regressed to ethno-nationalism, accounting for dominant discourse of nation building and national integration in Nigeria's political landscape. Difference in strategies and policies may account for the variation in nation-building process; however active citizen participation, national consciousness and awareness remain central to the idea of nation building. The idea of shared values and common history is more likely to foster a sense of homogeneity and belongingness, thus active citizen involvement is pertinent to nation building process. While conventional citizen participations inculcates voting, political protest, political party membership, civil societies and the likes. Penultimately, the interactive social revolution brought about by the internet has redefined the nature and premise of citizen participation that subsequently propels nation-building.

Void of class, race, gender or status, the advent of internet enabled social media platforms has revolutionized social cohesion. Citizens alike are able to express themselves and share opinions on social and public issues from the comfort of their mobile or other handheld internet devices. Contextually, the compounding effect of social media on the political landscape in Nigeria's fourth republic cannot be under emphasized. Social media sites have morphed up from social interactive platforms to political mobilization arenas. This assumption resonates from the defining role the social media played in the Arab Spring. While studies have argued the existence of a correlation between online political expression and political participation, the mechanisms through which they interact remains a subject of contestation. Understanding the mediating effects of a social media propelled national consciousness can help explain the nexus between online political expressions, offline participation and nation building in Nigeria's fourth republic.

In lieu, this study seeks to interrogate the precepts of new media theory, with a view to establishing a literary causality between social media and nation building, with laid emphasis on the 2011 and 2015 general elections in Nigeria. In the context of this study, Facebook and Twitter will suffice as social media platforms upon which analysis will be made. In furtherance, a descriptive method of social inquiry relevant empirical and theoretical literature will be reviewed, upon which deductions and conclusions will be made.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

By way of complimenting the introductory prologue of this research, this section is committed to defining and operationalizing pertinent concepts central to the arguments of the study. Amongst others they include nation-building, social media and political participation.

Nation

Like numerous other concepts in social sciences, establishing a universal understanding of what a nation constitutes has eluded the political science discipline as it has other related fields. The resulting difficulty could be attributed partly to the vast array of usage and interpretations. Nonetheless, Anderson (1983) conceives the nations as "imagined communities" bounded together by shared experience, common past and possible shared future aspirations. Graham et al (2007) in their capacity view it as an assumed belonging to any group will include among other things sharing same language, historical, physical, and cultural characteristics. Against this backdrop, it will suffice to claim the idea of nation embodies certain elements of shared historical experiences, a collective sense of homogeneity and elements of shared group identity. Contextually, the study will define nation based on policies or strategies aimed at nation-building. This logic is borne out of the arguments that nations do not just spring up; they are products of conscious efforts.

The most fundamental strategy for building a nation as identified by this research remains nationalism. Hence, the concept of nationalism will be further delved into from the standpoints of identity and self-actualization respectively. Consequently, Ubaku et al (2014, p. 55) are of the view that nationalism entails loyalty and devotion to a nation, especially a sense of national consciousness exalting one nation above all others and placing primary emphasis on the promotion of its culture and interests as opposed to those of other nations or supranational groups. Chikendu (2004, p. 48) defines it as a sentiment and activity directed towards the creation of a nation and the attainment of independent statehood. And for Omolewa (1986, p. 182) it is conceived as the love and pride in a country shown by its people. Within the precepts of this study nationalism entailed the struggle by a selected crop of elites, aimed at ending colonial domination. It also served a basis for homogenising various nations and tribes resulting from the Amalgamation of the then Nigeria in 1914.

Consequently, discussion on nations is somewhat incomplete without the idea of nationalism. In line with the foregoing debate, nationalism can be argued to have played a central role in unifying heterogeneous Nigeria against British domination. However with the demise of colonialism, it has failed in numerous attempts in creating a shared common identity, considered to be integral in building a nation.

Of the numerous importance of building a nation, the idea of fostering a political community, which corresponding to a defined territory, based on shared citizenship stands out. In congruent with realities that abound in the Nigerian polity, scholars and political entrepreneurs alike have adopted many policies or proposed certain strategies that will unify a highly diverse nation. Notable amongst includes National Youth Service Corp (NYSC) and Federal Character Commission (FCC) amongst numerous other enacted policies. Regrettably, they have largely remained unsuccessful in their numerous attempts at bringing about predetermined outcomes. Subsequently, in line with the aspirations of attaining a much needed homogenous identity, there lies for the propagation of for a conscious civic engagement geared towards the creation and preservation of a national identity.

Political Participation

Civic political engagement is at the centre of political science research, especially concentrating on voting behaviour and what are conceived as conventional forms of political participation. They entail but not necessarily limited to; advocacy, protest, contacting elected representatives or joining a political party or social organizations. While these remain core to democratic society, debates are emerging as regards to alternative forms of participation driven by new digital wave technological advancements. In particular, should we recognize actions facilitated by the participatory opportunities offered by new media communication platforms (such as social networks and blogs) as forms of political

participation? Do they have impacts on Offline political participation?

In conventional terms political participation abstractly denotes the active roles played by citizens in terms of selecting representation, demanding accountability, protests, lobbying geared towards affecting or informing political or policy outcomes. In a similar context Chatora (2012) refers to it as the numerous mechanisms through which the public express their political views and, and/or exercise their influence on the political process. In assent, Abubakar (2011) sees it as the involvement of people, (not necessarily active) in any political process before a collective decision is arrived. While for Okoro and Kenneth (2013, p. 33);

Political participation include such activities like political discourse, political campaigns, voter registration, the actual voting, writing and signing of petitions, attending of civil protests, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacy, monitoring and reporting of cases of violation of the electoral process such as frauds, rigging, intimidation, violence, monetary inducements, underage voting etc.

Accordingly, Casteltrione (2015, p. 2) claims scientific literature exhibits a consensus on the view that participating citizens are a central element of a healthy democracy, even though scholars still debate how often and in which forms citizens should participate in public decision-making processes.

Consequently, there seems to be a consensus among scholars and policy makers alike on the centrifugal roles of civic engagement in fostering democratic consolidation. However, there is no consensus on which acts are necessary, desirable and effective nor is there a handbook on the manner in which citizens should participate. This may in part be affected by the multidimensionality and usage of the concept, resulting in blur boundaries between what constitutes participation and what does not. With recourse to the ongoing debate, conventional forms of participation such as voting, organized protest, signing of petition, membership of civil organizations and the likes are relatively resource consuming. In Nigeria for instance where a better part of the population lives in abject poverty and high level of illiteracy abounds, civic participation is an exclusive club for middle-class and city dwellers. Before the advent of internet Okoro et al (2013, p. 34) argue in assent claiming,

Political participation was more risky, expensive and required a great deal of investments from individuals willing to engage in political activities. The process was quite demanding as far as time, money, knowledge and information are concerned. The endemic poverty in Africa prevented citizens from attending political meetings, and sometimes, from travelling to exercise their voting rights.

The advent of social media in the last few years has revolutionized the situation. As we now have accessible online platforms that serve as new deliberative and interactive forums where citizens from varying social classes interact and express their views. What are the mechanisms through which online deliberations and expressions of political views after offline participation? By offline participation, the study means the effects social media expressions in form of civic communication, deliberations and expressions online fosters sense of participation and possibly affect individual policy preferences and policy outcomes.

Social Media

The new technology due to the participatory, interactive and cost-effective nature has barely made everyone who can use it a mass communicator. Mayfield (2008) describes these media as “online platforms that promote participation, openness, conversation and connectedness”. Nation (2010) sees them as “social instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers or magazines. In the same manner as its offline predecessors, online political participation is not an easy term to define. Wojcik (2013) argue online political participation one of the most difficult concepts in political science. Gibson and Cantijoch (2013, p. 107) attribute this partly to the claims that classic definitions of political participation were formulated in the pre-internet era. Jensen (2013) cites examples of online political participation to include: signing an e-petition, e-voting, joining a political Facebook group, discussing politics, donating money, writing political blogs or contacting public officials.

In Nigeria the access to, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and the likes has given citizens a safe and cost effective medium to mobilize like minds, disseminate information and share political views. In this regards, the study defines social media political participation as the appropriation of internet enabled media applications and devices to participate in political discussions, deliberations and mobilizations from various locations. Establishing a correlation between online expressions and offline participation requires extensive empirical studies. However, Eurostat (2017) observes changes in political participation patterns in connection with increased internet access, 83 percent of households in the EU 28 countries in 2016, highlighting the importance of online political participation in Western democracies. Nonetheless, the direct causal effects of social media participation and policy objective actualization is an ongoing debate, the democratizing effects of social media cannot be over emphasized. Younger citizens who ordinarily feel estranged from the political process in Nigeria and becoming more active, this in part is made possible by the advent of social media platforms.

Furthermore, to broaden the literary reach of literature on the online/offline political participation dichotomy, there is need to distinguish between different forms of online political

participation, as obtained in the offline or conventional political participation literature. Although in the late 1990's Davis and Owen (1998, p. 113) claimed that the Internet at that time performs at least four political functions which connotes;

access news and political information, most of which was previously not as easily available, to link public officials and citizens through government and other political websites, provide a forum for political discussion; and to act as a public opinion gauge with the potential to offer immediate reactions to events and decisions.

The proposed distinction will most likely reduce instances of over-generalization, taking into cognisance the heterogeneous nature of the concept of political participation in itself. Consequently, while social media has revolutionized and broadened the scope of political participation, it is noteworthy to elucidate albeit its shortcomings, the tendencies of existing democratizing properties cannot be ignored. Some of the negative effects of social media on the Nigerian polity as observed by Adeyanju and Haruna (2011) is the contention that social media played a centrifugal role in instigating and fuelling the violence preceding the 2011 general elections. Claiming during the period, many Facebook pages were awash with false rumours and gossips that added to hitting up the polity and creating unnecessary tensions. In similar vein Okoro et al (2013, p. 32) claims social media mediated the effects of violence and tensions witnessed before, during and after the elections in many parts of the country, with some states ordering non-indigenes to leave.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To interrogate the plausible existence of a correlation between online political expressions and offline political participation, the study adopts the new media theory. In interrogating the concept of media, we tend to more than often have in mind 'communication media' and the specialised and separate institutions and organisations in which people worked: print media and the press, photography, advertising, cinema, broadcasting (radio and television), publishing, and so on. This is or was the conventional understanding of what media entails. However, with the inclusion of new, the paradigm depicts not just a shift in perception but also in usage and appropriation.

While there are no structured theoretical assumptions as to what new media is, Martin, Jon, Seth, Ian and Kelly (2003, p. 10) in their seminal work, *New Media - A Critical Introduction*, contend;

The term 'new media' emerged to capture a sense that quite rapidly from the late 1980's on, the world of media and communications began to look quite different and this difference was not restricted to any one sector or element of that world, although the

actual timing of change may have been different from medium to medium.

This change was of course not confined to media, the advent of information technology as obtained affected, economic, cultural, social as well as political spheres of globalizing world. The following as argued by Martin et al (2003, p. 12) are indicative of wider kinds of social, economic and cultural change with which new media are associated with;

a shift from modernity to post-modernity a contested, but widely subscribed attempt to characterise deep and structural changes in societies, second is the intensified process of globalisation a dissolving of national states and boundaries. The third is a replacement, in the West, of an industrial age of manufacturing by a post-industrial information and a decentring of established and centralised geopolitical orders.

There is a strong sense in which the 'new' in new media carries the ideological force of 'new equals better' and it also carries with it a cluster of glamorous and exciting meanings. The techno-cultural revolution which is spreading like a wildfire transformed and redefined civil engagement. While making a case for a cause and effect relationship between online expressions and offline participation will be better presented based on empirical findings. The new media has gained currency as a term because of its useful inclusiveness. Applying the new media theory to this study, users of social media are sharing their views, following political events and reaching out to their representatives in a safe cost effective and efficient manner. Users are able to select and use the technology in ways that suit their purpose. Thus, they as the audience are active and not passive. Similarly, political candidates are also able to select and use media of choice and message content of their choice during electoral campaigns and other electioneering activities.

In relating, social media expressions to offline participation within the precepts of new media theory, the study posits the numerous online campaigns such as the not too young to run initiative. Nigerian youths mobilized through Facebook, Twitter and the likes to pass information about meetings as well as to organize a peaceful procession to National Assembly in Abuja. Conclusively, new media has gotten more politically apathetic citizens aware and involved in numerous acts that amounts to civic engagement.

IV. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

This section is committed to reviewing existing empirical studies on social media and political participation. Nigeria witnessed its foremost definite encounter of social media use for political purpose during the 2011 general elections. Okoro et al (2013, p. 36) claims,

Nigerian politicians actively utilized social media in their campaigns. They sent bulk text and voice

messages in unprecedented numbers. They made massive use of Facebook pages and other social media platforms to win supports and canvass for votes. President Jonathan declared his intention to run for the presidency on Facebook and subsequently became the second most “liked” head of state in the world after US President Barack Obama.

On another account, Udejinta (2011) observes that one of the defining attribute of the 2011 general elections was the appropriation of new media, by politicians, political parties and electorates as a medium for political participation. The effect of social media on the elections is better communicated by President Goodluck Jonathan decision to declare his intention to run for office on Facebook.

In explicit terms Okoro et al (2013, p. 43) carried out an empirical study across the six geopolitical zone, aimed at attaining the effects and lapses social media has on the 2011 general elections. Upon analyzing the responses of subjects to the study they conclude;

that social media was used for political participation in Nigeria during the 2011 general elections. It also reveals that while a section of the society positively exploited the medium to campaign and interactive with would be representatives, report happenings in their areas/polling centres, share personal views and gauge public opinions; others used them to slander opponents, disseminate fakes new and incisive messages, shared digitally manipulate information, resulting in several data and identity thefts and the fuelled the post electoral violence that rocked the polity.

It will suffice to claim that social media albeit its shortcomings, has revolutionised the nature of civic engagement, as well as fostered a safer artificial intelligence sphere where citizens from all works of life converge to share their views. Also the array of platforms provided by social media has created rooms for diverse forms of political participation. With recourse to this study, social media arguably remains the most popular means of political participation. Its hegemonizing properties have brought citizens of diverse ethnic and tribal backgrounds under an artificial sphere, accessible to many. This effect in itself is thought to foster the probability of nation building in Nigeria. As an overview of political related discussion and activities on social media, depicts the sense of shared aspirations, common tragedy and similar objectives, hence creating the idea of collective belongingness.

To summarize, scholarship about online political participation is far from arriving at a consensus regarding the reach, determinants and content of the concept. This could be partly attributed to the claims that, activities regarded as online political participation seem to be constantly expanding. The internet has revitalized classic forms of participation and given rise to entirely new forms. Optimistically, it is thought

that social media can fill the cracks of nationalism and foster nation building in Nigeria.

V. SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: CHALLENGES, PROSPECT AND TRAJECTORIES

Where they are numerous platforms for political participation in the social media realm, technical ability as well as uneven access to internet facilities, may foster a divide leaving out non-internet users from political participation. In extreme cases Sunset (2007) argues a reinforcement of initial opinion, owing to absence of counter viewpoints, may catalyst group polarization, resulting in extremist tendencies upon discussion with like-minded individuals. In Nigeria for instance, it is not unusual to find allegiance amongst certain social media users based on ethnic, religious, class or political party affiliations. In recent times it has heated the polity and revitalised hate-speech, castigatory comments and the likes.

Another possible challenge may arise from overload of information. While certain political participation activities may be shared on the internet, not all users are likely to view such posts, because of the capacity for millions of post to be shared at the same time. Another possible challenge is fake news or misinformation. Because posts are hardly verified, self-seeking citizens or politicians exploit the social media for personal gains. Also fostering objective political discussion in Nigeria remains a near impossible task. Posts are likely to be misinterpreted or disintegrate into meaningless and sentimental opinions. Conclusively, not all internet users are devoted to online political expressions.

Optimistically, the anonymity associated with social media based political participation, increases the likelihood of increased appropriation of the medium to air political related expressions. A notable of the growing online based civic engagement is the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) forum. Social media, more precisely Twitter has served as a rallying point for sympathizers of the group to mobilize members, as well as engage with public officials. Also presidential aids in the persons of Segun Adesina, Shehu Garba ssnd the likes are constantly in discussions with Nigerians as Twitter as to state of affairs in Nigeria. These forms of discussions have the probability to affect policy outcomes. Also legislators in the likes of Senator Ben Bruce Murray, Senator Shehu Sani, Honorable Abike Dabiri Erewa and a host of others are also actively engaged on social media platforms. Penultimately, this study argues social media posses certain properties that foster nation building as well as its tendencies to invoke politically conscious citizen. Consequently, social media if harnessed and applied within certain framework may serve as a spring board towards nation building in ethnically divided societies such as Nigeria.

VI. CONCLUSION

Over the years numerous policies across formal colonies have been adopted with a view on consolidation on the demise of

colonial imperialism aimed at building nations. In Nigeria, certain factors such as but not necessarily limited to; ethno-nationalism, disregard for rule of law, institutional deficiencies, military incursions, weak state capacity, corruption and mismanagement of resources, political apathy have mitigated attempts at nation building. With the advent of techno-culture, citizens found common grounds to interact and share political ideals or public policy preferences. Regardless, of ethnicity, religion, tribe or party affiliations social media provides a level playing ground for relatively safer and cost effective platforms for political participation.

While the debate as to the presence of a cause and effect interpenetration between online political expressions and offline political participation, the study opines that the social media foster conscious political awareness. Albeit it's short-coming it has affected the propensities of political apathy. Though they abound evident research gaps in existing literature, it is argued that, social media if harnessed productively has the tendencies to homogenize citizens, foster common identity. This in turn like a chain reaction is argued to be a panacea upon which nation building process may be set in motion.

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