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Prof. K. U. Nnadi
Department of Maritime Management Technology
Federal University of Technology
Owerri, NIGERIA.
+234-803-752-3584

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SOCIAL MEDIA: A TREND OR THREAT TO DEMOCRACY?

A. J. Omede
Department of Political Science, University of Ilorin, Nigeria, and
Emmanuel Adeniran Alebiosu
Department of Political Science, Federal University Wukari, Nigeria
E-mail: medajol@yahoo.com alebiosuemma@gmail.com +2348060741252, +2348038436474

Abstract
The recent trend of democratization and the advancement in the information and communication technology have created a lot of awareness on the global development towards the social media. This situation has recently attracted a huge interest from researchers particularly in the field of social sciences. The emergence of the social media in contemporary times is changing the face of governance and democracy. In spite of the deep-rooted cultures of secrecy in the polity particularly in the political and bureaucratic hierarchies, the social media as a trend is fast becoming a veritable tool for a transformational agenda for transparency and accountability which are the pillars of democracy and good governance. Apart from being a revolutionary tool, the social media surreptitiously appears to be a potential risk and threat to democracy. Based on the foregoing, this paper examines two main issues. First, social media and democracy; and second the emerging trend of social media and its threat to democracy. In view of the almost lack of regulation and censorship on the social media, the paper posits that democracy may further be undermined on a larger scale with far reaching consequences if stakeholders in the polity are not sensitized on the possible negative effect of the social media.

Keywords: Democracy, good governance, social media, information and communication technology

Introduction

One of the major trends in the world is the emergence of the social media a term also known as the 'new media'. This emergence is as a result of the development and democratization of the information and communication technologies. It is characterised by the utilisation of various communication formats such images, video, text, and audio and driven by the combination of communication and information technology through the internet (Lasica, 2003). The social media according to Frentasia (2012: 6) is fascinating because it differs from traditional media such as newspapers and television in three important ways: One, it is able to facilitate two-way interaction with a large number of people at the same time; two, actors are connected with each other directly, without middlemen that control contents; three, and popular social media websites are free to join, making the cost of usage very low by modern standard.

As a trend, the social media has recently changed the face of governance and democracy which has been a major concern to social scientists. Although, democracy is a contested word that has made a strong appeal to the social media yet, the same concept has generated controversy among scholars particularly in the field of political science. However, democracy has given room for a greater human communication, freedom of expression and advancement in information and communication technology in the world today. The social media (through Facebook, twitter, YouTube etc.) has empowered the citizens to question any anti-people policy. Furthermore, it has opened up avenues for people to connect, communicate and participate in the governance of their country, as well as serve as a revolutionary tool that has made a better and greater increase in the demand for transparency, accountability and democratic reforms for a better society.

The point must also be made that social media platform like Facebook is used by many different countries and cultures, but not necessarily in the same way. Studies have shown that cultural differences profoundly impact the way people use social media (Sheedy, 2011). The study noted that though popular sites like Facebook and Twitter may be used by people of varied cultures, yet they may be utilized or understood the features in different ways. For example, Facebook treats all "friends" as the same, but some cultures may have

different expectations for different relationships (Sheedy, 2011). The global digital divide has made many of the democratic states to still have challenges of full internet access, where they do; it is limited to the urban cities. Many of these countries have also not taken the full advantage of the full capabilities of the social media due to their limited technical knowledge of its usage. Another limitation of social media, along the same lines, is a gap in the level of participation of social media users. Although trends seem to indicate that more and more individuals will use social media as time passes (Lindsey, 2013).

The capability of the social media to bring about societal transformation, promotion and advancement of democracy is not in doubt. The problem and lack of regulation and control of the social media have also made some scholars to perceive it has a threat to democratic societies. This is why attempts are being made (particularly in the face of Arab spring) to come up with policies and legal framework to restrict the use of the social media. George (2003) however noted that the inherent characteristics of the Internet and the economic benefits associated with the adoption of the technology makes it difficult for the government to regulate social media in the same way that it did with traditional media such as print and broadcast.

A major issue of contention is that of the freedom of expression. This is very fundamental to democracy and also important to the social media. In fact, the essence or major pillar of democracy which is embedded in the freedom of expression is a foundation in which the social media is built. The question may then be asked at this point; what is the nexus between democracy and the social media? How trendy has the social media become in democratic societies? How can the social media developed into becoming a risk to democracy? The answers to these questions can be found in this study.

The paper examines how the social media has become a trend; promote democracy and how it can also become a threat to democratic societies.

The study is qualitative, consequently explored secondary sources of data collection. The secondary sources are collected through relevant scholarly materials such as textbooks, articles, journals, official publications, internet articles and unpublished materials relevant to this research work. The data were analysed using the content analysis.

Conceptual issues

The need to conceptualize the social media and democracy in this paper is relevant for proper understanding.

Democracy

The concept of democracy has generated a lot of controversies among scholars such that there is no consensus on the general definition of the concept. Scholars have provided different definitions on democracy depending on the scholar's background, orientation, ideology etc.

Democracy in this paper is defined as the political system in which the citizens freely and actively participate in the governance of the state. In other words, democracy is the effective contribution and involvement of the citizens of a state in the management of affairs of their country. Though, various definitions have been offered by scholars as argued earlier, none has however, left out the people as not being crucial to democracy. In fact, the reason for democracy is the people. This implies that without the people, there is no democracy.

Essential to the people in a democratic society is their freedom (expression, association, assembly etc) which is guaranteed and protected by the fundamental law of the land. Among other ingredients of democracy are equality before the law, periodic, free and fair election, majority rule, independent and impartial judiciary, accountability etc. These ingredients of democracy nevertheless would need a platform and channel of communication which the government and the people can freely and meaningfully use to contribute to the development of the democratic system.

Social media

The social media are interactive, web-based media that belong to the new genre of media that focus on social networking, allowing users to express themselves, interact with people, share personal information, as well as publish their own views on the internet (Adibe et al, 2012). This implies that

the social media are online social networks, technology and methods through which people share content, opinions, information and ideas – whether this is in the form of text, images, audio or video (Denham and Jeans 2013).

The social Media are built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). It is driven by information and communication technology. Among the technological factors for social media development are increase in broadband availability, the improvement of software tools and development of more powerful computer and mobile devices (Dewing, 2010).

The social media networks are the online tools and utilities that allow communication of information online, participation and collaboration (Storck, 2011). The social media is

> "An interactive medium that departs from the one-sided communication of existing mass media; an active and creative medium enabling users to transform from viewers, listeners and readers to participants; a direct medium in which individual users are able to determine at a distance what happens in the centre of among others politics and the mass media; a platform on which everybody is equal in principle as assumed expertise has to prove itself before being accepted" (van Dijk, 2013).

Some of the features of the social media are decentralisation and democratisation of information resources, enhanced dialogues, and erosion of traditional gate-keeping and agenda-setting functions (Chaffee and Metzger 2001). According to Dewing (2010), persistency, replicability, searchability and accessibility are the attributes of the social media. Persistency, according to him relates to making the content posted on the social media sites remain permanently by default while replicability is copying and sharing of the content. Other attributes as searchability in locating the content very easily using the online search tools as well as accessibility which is the usage of the social media anywhere at any time, where an internet connection is available are also important. The most popular social media are Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, blogs, Flickr, etc.

Social media and democracy: the nexus

People (the citizenry) are fundamental to both democracy and the social media. The social media as a platform is built in order to further provide the people the opportunity of interaction and contribution to the society. It is a medium to transform people's communication and way of life, and to further empower the people to make them communicate and participate effectively in the affairs of the society. What this implies is that, the people are the focus of the social media which is aimed at transforming their contribution to the society.

Logically derived from the foregoing is the fact that people are the corner-stone of democracy. This is because people are constantly involved in communication, dialogue and consensus and sometimes compromise in order to bring about development to the democratic state. The use of the social media by the mass of the people has impacted positively on the democratic process. Democracy has advanced and promotes the use of the social media by the people. Therefore, any shift of attention from the people will have a significant impact on the balance between the social media and democracy.

The social media and democracy cannot evolve without the right to freedom of expression. The people's freedom of expression is one of the foundations of both democracy and the social media. The right to freedom of expression is guaranteed and protected by the fundamental law of the land in a democratic state. This is because the use of the social media in a democracy is an extension of the rights to freedom of expression. It is simply the use of technology to facilitate and enhance the people's right to express their views and opinion about issues within the polity. From this perspective therefore, one will not be wrong to assert that any restriction on the freedom of the people to express themselves is definitely an aberration under a democratic system.

The social media and democracy both focus their attention on the issues of equality. One of the ingredients of democracy is equality before the law. The law in democratic state is no respecter of anybody. Similarly, the social media networks provide equality to the people irrespective of their status.

It is also important to state here that the social media landscape is a form of citizens' democracy involving the political right of freedom of access to information and the exchange of information (Dick et al, 2012: 10). One of the pillars of a democratic state is access to information. In fact, information is considered the lifeblood of democracy such that deficiency in essential information according to Ohiagu (2010) leads to severe deformation, and no healthy democracy can emerge from a severely deformed society. Democracy and the social media offer the people greater access to information. The access to information and the use of the social media in a democratic state has brought about greater demand for transparency, accountability and democratic reforms which generate public debate among the citizens and government.

As a medium, the Internet (the platform which the social media operate) is unique in making it easier for a broader range of voices to access information without the influence of institutions or entrenched power-holders. Citizen journalists spread their messages and their realities through the eyes of those on the ground. The social media (bloggers and online forums) offer alternative sources of information. Governments are less able to control the flow of information than through traditional media (Bruce Etling, 2010 cited in Lim and Sexton, 2012: 299).

Democracy and social media are interrelated to such an extent that democracy has fostered social media use by way of further making the government to promote freedom of expression which is the foundation of the social media. The social media has also foster democracy by increasing Peoples avenue to contribute to public affairs and influencing certain government decisions. Social media is therefore democracy in action.

Social media: a trend in democratic states

The rapid and widespread use of the social media among the people (especially the young ones) particularly in the democratic societies has made it to become one of the platforms on the internet that is most utilized. In fact, the rapid use of the social media continues to increase at a speed beyond expectations. This assertion has been buttressed by Berkman (2013), when he opined that social media usage over the past decade has been one of the most rapidly and universally adopted activities since the invention of breathing such that more than half of the world's 2.4 billion Internet users sign in to a social network regularly — a figure that is rapidly increasing.

In democratic states, the increasing utilization of the social media as a tool is seemly representing the people's freedom such that their communication, interactions and engagements with the democratic process and activities is fast becoming to deepen and expanding day by day. This is due to the inclusiveness, openness, interactiveness, user-friendly, cost-effectiveness and uncensorship of the social media. In addition to the increasing usage and trend of the social media are its flexibility, accessibility and affordability.

The social media trend may continue without slowing down because it has further expanded and provided opportunity and encouragement for contribution with community members. In the political sphere, it has become a veritable tool for mobilizing citizens towards active participation in the democratic process (Adibe et al, 2012). It has been said that the active engagement of the social media contributed significantly to the success of President Obama presidential election in 2008. This has a great impact on democratic states in the world such that many presidential election aspirants or candidates took to the social media to seek for support and donations and also interact with the people.

In democratic states, election candidates (especially presidential election contestants) and democratic institutions have considered the social media platform as a veritable tool of communicating and engaging the stakeholders on the sustenance and consolidation of democracy. Social media has revolutionized political activism.

Political parties and their candidates now use social media tools to mobilize, interact and communicate with their people and to find out and also show concern about the issues affecting them generally in the society.

The legislature is considered the true representative of the people in a democratic state. As such, public knowledge of its activities is essential to the sustenance of democracy. As a trend, the social media are now been used to make the people understand the activities and the need for representative democracy with the aim according to Clarke (2010) of reinforcing public trust and interest in parliamentary governance. The UK parliament has been particularly active in its use of social media to foster public engagement. At present, it has a YouTube channel, a Flickr account, a Twitter account and Facebookpage (UK Parliament 2009) each of which offers frequent updates on parliamentary members and committees activities (Clarke, 2010).

The interaction between the government and the people is also deepening with use of the social media. The social media has been used to make the people know the direction of government policies and activities, provide opportunities for the people to participate and contribute to the process of policy formulation and implementations and monitor government and its agencies activities and raise alarm where there is a deviation from the code of conduct of policy makers and abuse of people's rights. The non-availability of professional news journalists at this point instantly makes the people 'citizen journalists', to report the issue and publish it on the social media through the use of their mobile devices and other technological tools available to them.

This many times brings public attention to the issue at stake. Many of the government agencies in United Kingdom, United States of America and Canada are now using the social media platform to further effectively and efficiently reach out to the people and enhance their responsibilities to them.

More recently, the growing use of social media for self-expression and the sharing of opinions have spurred the government's recognition of social media's potential to change the political landscape (Ting, 2011: 60). In view of this, many of the democratic states (Australia, Kenya, United Kingdom, Ghana, Uganda, Switzerland, Nigeria, Malawi etc.) and leaders now have active social media accounts and equally appoint social media consultants as government officials to manage the social media strategy of their government. President Jonathan though has a Special Adviser on Media, he recently appointed a Special Assistant on Social Media, Reno Omokri.

The social media as a trend has come to stay with the people in the world particularly the democratic states whose freedom has greatly been enhance and put to light for further debate and development. However, the democratization and liberalization of the social media seems to have also constituted into a threat to democracy.

Social media: a threat to democracy

No doubt, social media has become a phenomenon that has created opportunity and space for the people to interact and express their mind on issues of the society. As social media has grown in popularity and become mainstream it has been faced with growing controversy and criticism (WDD, 2009) and seen to be a new threat to democracy. The problem of identifying and verifying some of the sources and contents either shared or posted on social media accounts is a great threat to democracy. Many facebook and twitter accounts and blogs have been created without the people whose names were been used knowing about it. These accounts are sometimes used for criminal activities.

For examples, in the United Kingdom, social media accounts (especially blogs) are created to look like official blogs of members of parliament. These bloggers according to Bernard (2009) cited in Clarke (2010: 7) do so either to compare particular members of parliament to start their own legitimate blog or to critique the Member of Parliament they are impersonating.

Also, the privacy of the people that have created social media accounts are sometimes hacked and use for other embarrassing purposes which have made the people to call for their security and privacy protection. Bernard argued that this can make political figures to be misrepresented in potentially damaging ways. This fraudulent act

resulted into stakeholders in the democratic process to at different times declared openly of not knowing about certain social media accounts that were created in their names. Consequently, they have appeal to the public to disregard them. These attitude and activities have tended to polarize the people and cause very serious crisis that can threaten the democratic system.

The difficulty of regulating the social media appears to be undermining democracy. People have taken the advantage of the unregulated nature of the social media to either post or share contents that are harmful to the democratic process. According to Galvin (2013), social media accounts allows terrorist to disseminate propaganda (to international audiences with whom it would otherwise be difficult to communicate) to an impressionable age bracket that have the potential to empathize with their cause. As the Westgate siege unfolded, the Somali militants used a social media account (a twitter handle) to churn out messages goading Kenyan authorities and claiming the responsibilities for the attack (Galvin, 2013).

In view of the above situation, some countries have come up with attempts (e.g. Nigeria etc.) and legislative control of the social media. However, this has clearly been criticized as been an encroachment upon people rights. Some of these controls according to Dick, et al (2012: 46) include Australia's mandatory national web-filtering system, Finland's increased Internet surveillance for terrorist threats, the UK's Internet Censorship and Disconnection Law, the USA's Stop Online Piracy Act and Protect Intellectual Property Act, South Africa's Protection of Information Bill, and Chile's Internet bill. In fact,

> "these laws and regulations are not very different in intent and scope to legislation in authoritarian regimes, such as Singapore's Internet regulatory framework, Myanmar's Electronic Act, Pakistan's Internet filtering, and China's range of regulatory mechanisms" (Dick, et al., 2012: 46).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The paper argued that the growing use of the social media as a trend will continue for many centuries to come in spite of its criticism. This is in view of the fact that, the phenomenon has come to stay and the general acceptability and usage by the people clearly indicate this. It seems to represents peoples freedom. The use of social media by the people is however giving the democratic states great concern particularly in the face of the Arab Spring. Government intention to have a great control over the use of the social media is not in doubt.

Some of the recommendations which can foster the use of social media in democracy and also advance democracy by the use of the social media are that the global digital divide among the democratic states calls for a global concern and international efforts aim at addressing the issue. Democratic societies with low internet access should be supported and the cost of access to the internet should be extremely cheap.

The democratic states should foster citizens' access to information and freedom of expression so as to further deepen and consolidate democracy. In view of the almost lack of regulation and censorship on the social media, mass orientation should be organized to make the people understand effective use of the social media without necessarily using it to threaten democracy.

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