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Changing the Narrative of Election Monitoring in Nigeria: The Role of Citizen Journalism

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ABSTRACT

Election in Nigeria is often marred by electoral malpractices. This study assessed the changing narrative in the election process in Nigeria owing to citizen journalism. Situated within the context of Democratic Participant Media Theory, this paper maintains that citizen journalism has been used to mobilize electorate to participate in political activities as well as monitor election proceedings in both developed and developing countries of Africa. The emergence of social networking sites which is heralded by the advent of the internet is opening up the public sphere to a more transparent and participatory form of democracy. Several organizations are beginning to see the potentials inherent in these communication devices in enhancing political participation, social mobilization and even civil protest. Today, several Nigerians have email accounts, and huge numbers of people have signed up for social networking sites and numerous audiences – driven online citizen journalism sites and discussion forums. As a result, dissemination of news is no longer an exclusive preserve of the conventional media of communication alone. Citizens are now actively involved in producing and generating media content in the country. In a nutshell, the introduction of new media technology into the political arena of Nigerian politics will greatly enhance credible elections progressively.

Keywords: Citizen Journalism, Election monitoring, Internet, Social Media and Nation.

INTRODUCTION

The origin of citizens engaged in journalism originated in the United States. It was indeed in realization of the professional ineptitude of traditional journalists of their own weaknesses in covering the electoral event during the U.S. presidential election of 1988 that led to the emergence of a group of journalists who called themselves “citizen journalists”. This group of journalists became part of the public or civic journalism movement, a countermeasure against the eroding trust in news media and widespread public disillusionment with politics and civic affairs [1]. The advent and growth of Information and Communication Technologies and their widespread integration in the society has further provided citizens the platform to actively engage themselves in the political process. Today, with the use of the mobile phones, computers and the Internet, citizens are empowered to collect and disseminate information to any part of the globe within a relatively short period of time [2]. The exponential growth in technology has challenged the traditional form of journalism in contemporary times. The conventional one –way producer to the consumer mass communication has given way to user- generated media, made possible by the availability of relatively inexpensive, easy-to use technological gadgets, as well as cultural trends that encourage citizens to produce media content [3]. Since the emergence of Citizen journalism in the United State of America in the 18th century, its growth and popularity has gained wide acceptance in both developed and developing countries of the world. For instance, in Nigeria, citizens of the country are already actively involved in citizen journalism [4]. Since 2000 several Nigerians have established so many online media websites, blogs and set up twitter accounts. For example, [5], argued that Odili.net having been established in 2002, leads the pack in online media use and

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establishment of blogs in Nigeria. The Nigerian Village Square (NVS) followed in 2003. It was wholly a UGC site. Nairaland, was thereafter established in 2004 and named after the Nigerian currency by a young 22 years old unemployed graduate called Seun Osewa, in Lagos. Other online media sites include Africa.net, Sahara Reporters, Naija Community, and Naijapals.com among others. Studies on the role of citizen journalism in elections have been documented by scholars around the world. For instance, the Australian 2007 election attests to the fact that citizen journalists played a significant role in monitoring the election. Citizen journalism websites like JohnQuiggin.Com, Youdecide2007, TimBlair.net, and News.com.au's extended the public sphere for citizen's involvement in political coverage, debate, discussion, and deliberation during the election. However, even though citizen journalism is a welcome development in the society, its practice is often beclouded with the issue of credibility, trust, and lack of objectivity. This study focuses on citizen journalism and election monitoring in Nigeria [6].

Conceptual Clarification of Citizen Journalism

[1], notes that citizen journalism is a rapidly evolving form of journalism where common citizens take the initiative to report news or express views about happenings within their community. He further observes that it is news of the people, by the people and for the people. Citizen journalism is therefore a people centered type of journalism where the interests of the ordinary people are taken into consideration. Citizen journalism also known as "public", "participatory", "democratic", "guerilla" or "street journalism" is the concept of members of the public playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information [7,8,9]. According to [10], citizen journalism emerged as a result of democratization of the multi-media technologies by the people and for the people. New media technologies have made possible for members of the public to take on the responsibility of representing common interest and actively participating in the creation and dissemination of information [11]. Expounding on the concept of citizen journalism, [12] submits that citizen journalism is an alternative and activist form of news gathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions, often as a response to the shortcoming in the professional journalistic field that uses similar journalistic practices but is driven by different objectives and relies on alternative sources of legitimacy than the traditional media or mainstream journalism. This is apt in explaining the nature of media operations in Nigeria today where the majority of media outfits are controlled by the state and are often manipulated to serve the interest of those in power. Through blogs, Twitter, and YouTube, citizen journalists have broken stories about political corruption, police brutality, and other issues of concern to local, national and international communities. The rationale behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalism training can use the tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the internet to create, augment, or fact-check media own or collaboration with others [12]. It is based on the above that [10] noted that "independent media enable ordinary citizens to become politically empowered". According to her, when people create their own media, they are able to represent themselves and their communities.

Conceptualizing Election

The modern "election" which consists of public elections of government officials didn't emerge until the beginning of the 17th Century when the idea of representative government took hold in North America and Europe [4]. According to [10] cited in [10] election is the act of choosing public officers to fill vacant posts by vote, it is an act of choosing those that govern a state; it may be conducted periodically. Elections are central in the institution of democratic representative governments. The reason is that, in democracy, the authority of the government derives solely from the consent of the governed. The principal mechanism for translating that consent into governmental authority is the holding of free and fair elections. Corroborating [10] sees election as the method of making political choices by voting or choosing candidates for political offices usually by eligible voters or the electorate. It is on this premise that [10], avers that elections are an important component of democracy and without periodic and regular elections, democracy gradually loses its value and appeal. To [6], "election is one procedure of aggregating preferences of a particular kind and a process of choosing between alternatives." Elections can be done in practice only through forms of procedure accepted as binding within the political society. [8] cited in [11] asserts that election is regarded as the central institution of democratic government. This assertion is significant considering the fact that in a democracy, the authority of the government derives solely from the consent given by the governed to the leaders. The primary mechanism for obtaining and translating that consent into governmental authority is holding genuinely democratic elections [10] Since Nigeria's return to democratic rule in May 1999, after decades of military dictatorship, the nation has been facing the challenge of conducting free and fair election such that even international observers attest to the fact that previous elections in the country were fraudulent with all kinds of electoral malpractices. For example, the 1999, 2003, 2007, and 2011 elections recorded massive rigging by the government in power such that European Observer Mission (EUEON) and other key international observers widely claimed that these elections were flawed with irregularities of varying degrees. It is in this light that it is hoped that citizen journalism will help promote transparency and accountability during elections.

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Theoretical Underpinning

This study is situated within the context of Democratic Participant Media Theory postulated by Denis McQuail. The major tenets of the theory according to him stem from the outrage that the existing bureaucracy as well as commercialization and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down, so as to guarantee easier media access for all potential users and consumers [8]. Shedding more light on the theory, McQuail says the theory was developed in reaction against commercialization and monopolization of privately owned media and against the centralism and bureaucratization of public broadcasting institutions. The theory therefore advocates a horizontal communication system where citizens can participate in the communication process rather than the top-down communication structure. It is in this light that the democratization of media technologies has engendered the participatory nature of communication that allows for user-generated content and the creation and distribution of mass media content among ordinary citizens, thus, breaking the monopoly that was once in the grasp of traditional media of communication. Applying the Democratic Participant Theory to this discourse, the theory provides the latitude for citizens to gather, share, generate, and distribute information without interference.

Citizen Journalism and Election Monitoring in Nigeria

Citizen journalism has been used to mobilize electorate to participate in political activities as well as monitor election proceedings in both developed and developing countries of Africa. The emergence of social networking sites which is heralded by the advent of the internet is opening up the public sphere to a more transparent and participatory form of democracy. Several organizations are beginning to see the potentials inherent in these communication devices to enhance political participation, social mobilization and even civil protest. Today several Nigerians have Email accounts, and huge numbers of people have signed up for social networking sites and numerous audiences – driven online citizen journalism sites and discussion forums. As a result, dissemination of news is not an exclusive preserve of the conventional media of communication alone. Citizens are now actively involved in producing and generating media content in the country. Nigerians are no longer passive consumers of media content again. Nigeria had its own share of testing the pervasive power of new media technology in the 2011 general elections. Prior to this time, the traditional media of communication were exclusively responsible for the monitoring of election activities. However, the 2011 general election saw the massive deployment of new media technology by both conventional journalists and citizen journalists alike. [7, 9], reported that during the elections in Nigeria, many Nigerians were armed with their blackberries and Twitter account feeds. They further observe that one of such Nigerian was Gbenga, a 33 year old IT consultant and activist, his team had designed a smart-phone application called Revoda which allowed voters to instantly upload photos, pictures and reports delayed arrival of materials and presence of intimidating gangs at their local polling stations. In a related development, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) handed out blackberry pin via Twitter for voters to send reports from their polling booths. During the elections, several Nigerians were able to send reports on Facebook and Twitter on the proceedings of events in their respective polling stations. A case in point that got people's attention is the case of a woman that was captured on YouTube video by a citizen journalist thumb-printing multiple times on numerous ballot papers. On Twitter, she was fondly tagged "The last VoteBendor" and the attention of INEC was drawn to the case. A report on the role played by social media in the elections revealed that INEC posted over 4000 tweets, many in response to voters queries [10]. Civil society organizations and groups were able to mobilize youths to monitor election proceedings in their respective voting centers. For instance, the Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation established a social media tracking center during the elections where youths were involved in monitoring election proceedings in the entire country. Civil society organizations also established reporting platforms via SMS, Twitter, Websites, Blogs and phone lines. An Abuja based civil society group established a civil society Election Situation Room, which received reports from the field during the election process and relayed information to INEC, the Police Service Commission and the Nigerian police respectively [8, 9]. Furthermore, organizations such as "Enough is Enough Nigeria", ReclaimedNija", "Wongo", "Iam Lagos" and a host of many others established social media platforms enabling citizens to report election –related incidences with pictures, videos, text messages and voicemail. The ReclaimNiaja which was launched in March 2011 demonstrated a change in mood as hundreds of community activities, ranging from motorbikes and taxi drivers to market women, hairdressers and battery chargers, stood and held their mobile phones aloft, "the power is in our hands." Writing on the impact of new media technology in elections [11], argues that new media technology has played a greater role in the elections. In a nutshell, the introduction of new media technology into the political arena of Nigerian politics will greatly enhance credible elections progressively.

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