Assessing the Effects of Changing Media Technology and Alternative Media on Political Communication in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT: The rapidly changing media environment, as a result of technological advances, is proving hard to track and control for those who hold stake in the way information reaches people of interest, such as politicians and their voters. As a result, political communication has been facing several challenges in recent years. The mediation role of professional media seems to be losing grounds to a growing echo of alternative media voices, for example, leading to increased personalization or skewing of electoral campaigns to personalities rather than national issues, just as imagery and perception of individual candidates through political marketing by the media become more mainstream. With that in mind, 300 questionnaires were distributed to voter age population in Nigeria out of which 289 were retrieved and used. The intent was to see how alternative media is shaping political discourse and to what extent. The result shows an extensive use of alternative media at 64%. One of the most significant findings is: a much higher rate of citizen participation recorded at 84% of respondents brought about by popular use of alternative media, has not translated into satisfaction with the current state of politics and politicians which was rated at 48% and dissatisfaction at 52%. With 44% of the same respondents citing non relevance of contents disseminated by professional media as the main reason for the shift to alternative media, recommendations include the need for professional media to make concerted efforts in following new developments in technologies and user taste, in order to match those changes with favorable contents.

KEYWORDS: Political communication, new media impact, communication technology, public opinion

Introduction

Now more than ever, the need for a deeper understanding of effective strategies for political communication is necessary. Rapid changes in technology continue to impact mass media in unprecedented ways. Mass Media plays a vital role in politics, most especially, a key mediating role in the formation of political culture. When complemented by a democratic environment guided by the principles of free speech and free press, mass media is courted by the politician and depended upon by the public. The politicians use mass media to propagate their ideas and convince voters. The voters, on the other hand, use it to stay informed via news and expert opinion provided regularly. Today, the public's participation in the formation and development of relevant political agenda has expanded significantly, owing to the advancement in technology and availability of simple devices that allow instant and delayed feedback. Modern interactive platforms provide the opportunity for voters (users) to inject their views into ongoing media programs, as well as delayed feedback into other media output.

These continuous changes brought about recurrently by technological advancement and upgrades pose numerous challenges to political culture formation, at variance to the norm where these changes use to take time, while getting gradually accommodated. Other challenges faced include those from the misuse of new media such as the creation and propagation of fake news, social mobilization of large crowds that have caused governments to fall across the globe, direct voter/politician communication and messaging via tweeter handles that has been a double-edge-sword of sorts, etc. In short, the political terrain as well as governance has become quite

unpredictable, leading to political destabilization across nations. The need exists, therefore, to explore more deeply, discover, understand, as well as manipulate the various factors that may be at play in ways that can assure a more friction-free absorption of these changes occurring within the political terrain.

Background to the study

It is important to understand the multidisciplinary nature of political communication. Until recently, its various components were studied separately within certain disciplines. Political communication began to emerge as a distinct discipline in the 1950s (Nimmo & Sanders 1981). Political science and communication studies are not the only two disciplines concerned with political communication. In fact, earlier studies were also conducted under other disciplines such as psychology, and sociology. Even then it was more or less a "cross- disciplinary" field of study – though other scholars argue regarding its origins as a field, saying it may have started centuries earlier with Plato's work about politics and society in ancient Greece (Lin 2004). Over the years, as the field begins to become consolidated, Lin offered, three distinct groups emerged, based on research interests; (i) those that study political rhetoric (e.g. Bormann, Gronbeck, and Medhurst)- within the discipline of speech communication; (ii) scholars from the field of journalism and media studies (e.g. Atkin, Becker, Chaffee, McCombs, Rubin and Weaver); and (iii) those with mixed political Science, journalism and media background (e.g. Murray and Perry).

Political communication over the years gave birth to rhetoric criticism, which is usually qualitative research that seeks to dissect political speeches of presidents, governors and other high office holders, as well as campaign and rally speeches of politicians. Rhetoric criticism is, however, classified as interpersonal rather than Mass communication. Mass Communication, on the other hand, and within the context of political communication occupied themselves more with political advertising research, voters, and media coverage analysis. For political advertising (Kaid 2004), areas of research interest include the "legal and regulatory context within which it occurs, special effects associated with negative advertising, political advertising and the internet, and news coverage of political activities. It is noteworthy to understand that candidate-centred advertisements are more common in the United States' political communication domain than in other countries.

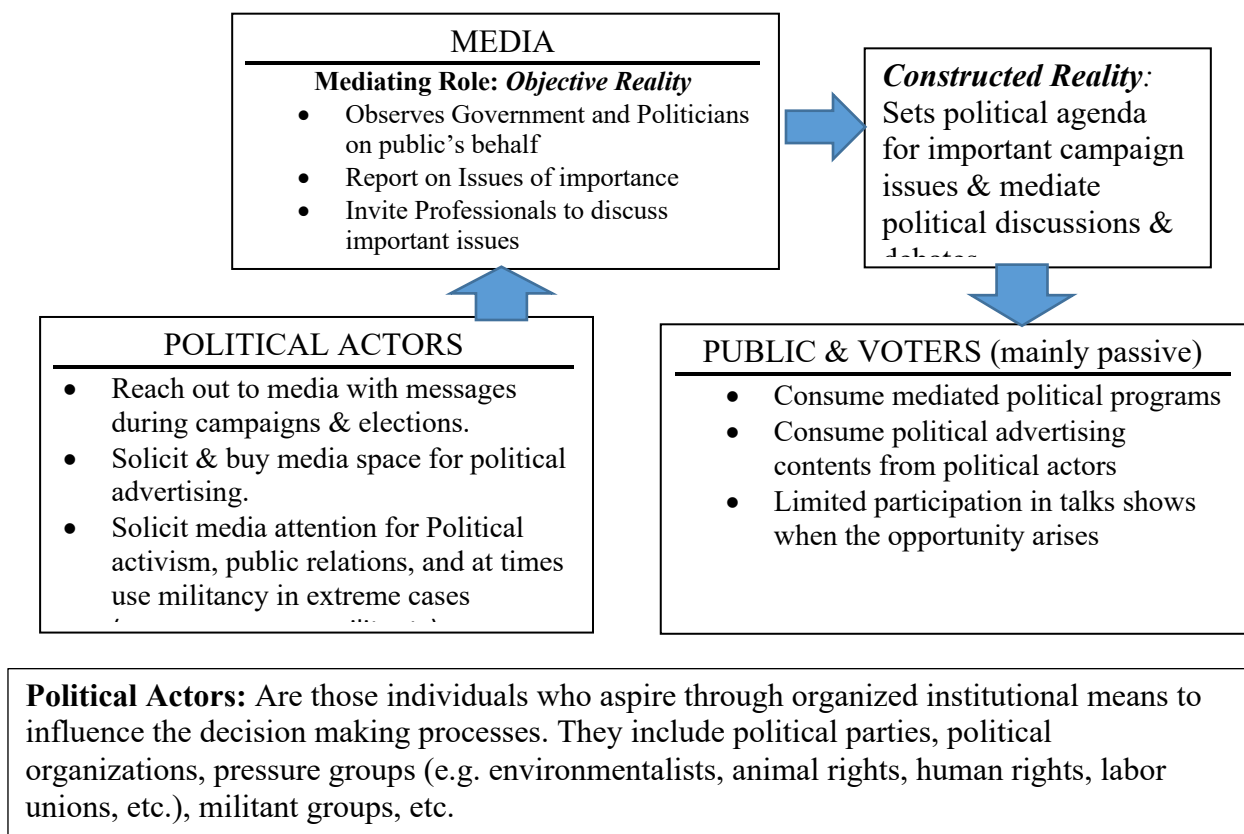## Politics, Technology and alternative media

A significant employment of the internet to political activities began in the United States during the 1996 elections cycle, where according to a few scholars (Tedesco 2004), "all serious presidential candidates and majority of congressional candidates established an online presence." Internet uses in politics and it's potential in augmenting and expanding the horizons of public sphere influence was studied by some scholars (Sparks, in Bennett & Entman Eds. 2001). They described how citizens have always yearned for accessible, non-commercialized public sphere where they can engage in political information exchange 'independent of government constraint.' At the same time, they foresee the overwhelming strength of commercial interests in the United States overcoming that ability soon, lamenting "the American commercial model could more or less completely and rapidly take over the internet."

Quite a number of books within the political science arena have also contributed to the discourse. By conducting a twenty-year content analysis of digital campaign content across four nations (Gibson 2020)—the United Kingdom, Australia, France, and the United States—the book maps the key shifts in the role and centrality of the internet in election campaigns. Published in 2020, the book also speculates, based on its findings, how future campaigns using digital technology may look like. Other authors (Owens 2018) explore why and how social-media messages have become a primary source of information (in tweets, for example) in places

where Donald Trump's support rans high. And for those studies focused on pressure groups, associations and other groups that use activism to penetrate the political terrain seeking policy changes, a publication (Penny 2018) dealt with how effective digital media has been as a tool of political activism, offering comparative eras of pre-digital as well as the digital era we live in. An earlier text (Bailard 2014) 'argues that the Internet—by altering the quantity and range of information available to citizens—directly influences the ability of individuals to evaluate government performance. Two theories, mirror-holding where greater amount of information access allows evaluation of government performance, and window-opening where access to diverse information about other governments allows the opportunity for citizens to compare other governments to their own.

Haussle (2021), who studied the discourse on climate change in the United Kingdom over a 30-month period, concluded that the effect of the internet and alternative media made not only the professional media actors almost irrelevant, but the main actors "become more marginal with respect to the authority they command." Another scholar stresses the changing political communication environment from when journalists decide what the relevant political issues are, to the present state where the internet with its cheap and very accessible network has diversified and brought in multitudes of users to comment and shape the political discourse (Koopmans & Zimmermann 2010).

<div align="center">Fig. 1 A Model Describing the Mediating Role of Professional Media
before Alternative Media Popularity</div>
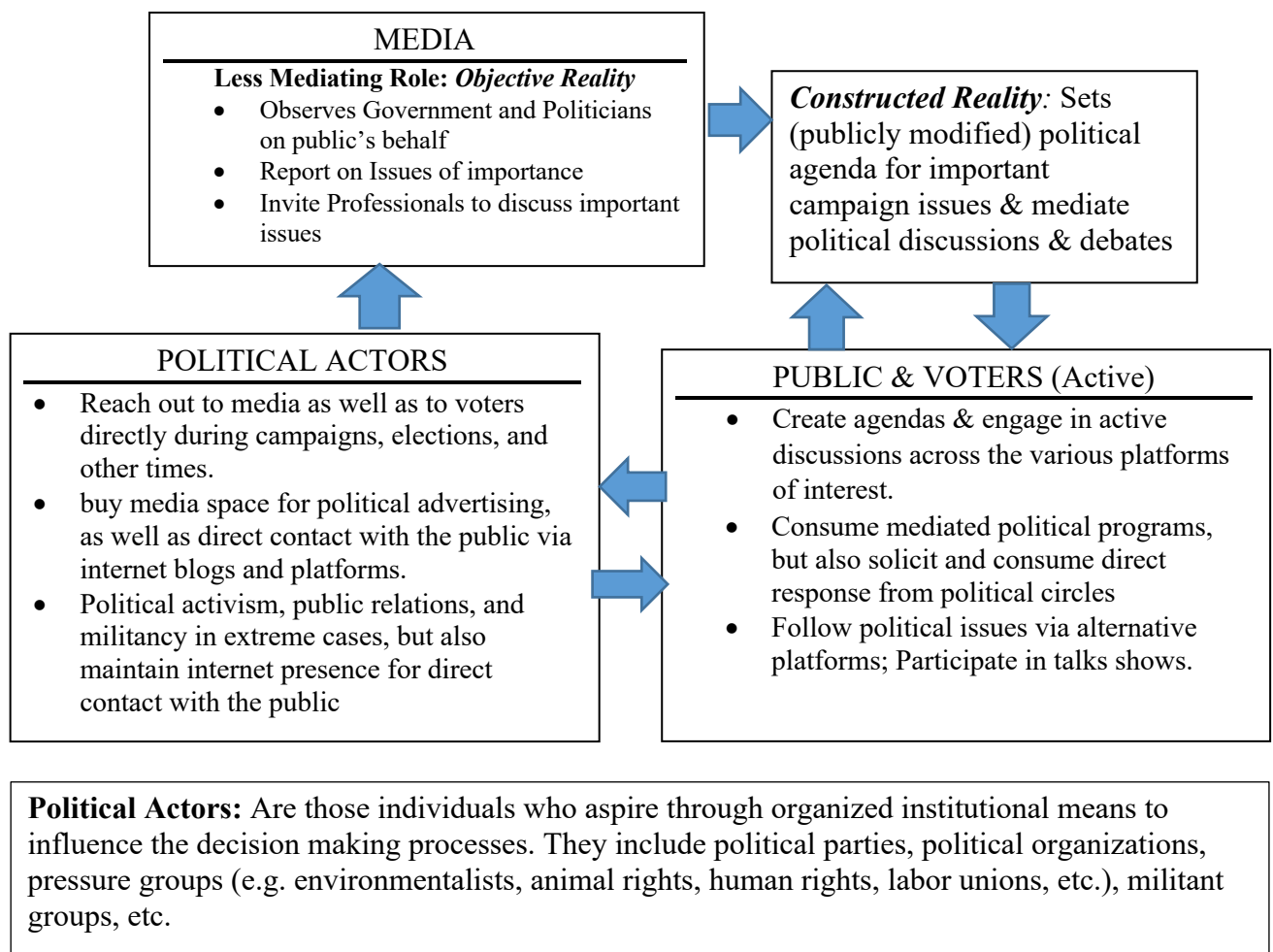

MEDIA

Mediating Role: *Objective Reality*
- Observes Government and Politicians on public's behalf
- Report on Issues of importance
- Invite Professionals to discuss important issues

***Constructed Reality*:** Sets political agenda for important campaign issues & mediate political discussions & debates

POLITICAL ACTORS
- Reach out to media with messages during campaigns & elections.
- Solicit & buy media space for political advertising.
- Solicit media attention for Political activism, public relations, and at times use militancy in extreme cases

PUBLIC & VOTERS (mainly passive)
- Consume mediated political programs
- Consume political advertising contents from political actors
- Limited participation in talks shows when the opportunity arises

Political Actors: Are those individuals who aspire through organized institutional means to influence the decision making processes. They include political parties, political organizations, pressure groups (e.g. environmentalists, animal rights, human rights, labor unions, etc.), militant groups, etc.

<div align="center">*Source: Original models by author (Hadiza Wada), © 2022*</div>

The model 1 above (Fig. 1) gives a descriptive and/or pictorial view of the role of media in a typical political communication scenario before the popular adoption of social and alternative media. The three segments involved, i.e. the political actors, the media and the public (voters) interact in ways that ensure the basic support necessary for democratic ideals to flourish, basically the government of the people, by the people and for the people.

For model 2 (Fig. 2), it displays the changes that have resulted so far, just as more changes continue to come through the pike as a result of more technological changes and more adaptations to those changes. It shows significant shifts occurring throughout the communication chain, from message sourcing, encoding, channels of disbursing and devices of reception. Most importantly, to scholars of mass media, is the direct contact between the other two sectors that tend to bypass the professional media, for better or for worse. For worse in cases where seekers of political offices sell themselves directly to unsuspecting voters, getting into offices without the rigorous scrutiny necessary to weed out and expose demagogues and anti-democratic elements.

Fig. 2 A Model Describing the Diminishing Role of Professional Media
After Alternative Media Popularity

MEDIA

Less Mediating Role: *Objective Reality*
- Observes Government and Politicians on public's behalf
- Report on Issues of importance
- Invite Professionals to discuss important issues

Constructed Reality: Sets (publicly modified) political agenda for important campaign issues & mediate political discussions & debates

POLITICAL ACTORS
- Reach out to media as well as to voters directly during campaigns, elections, and other times.
- buy media space for political advertising, as well as direct contact with the public via internet blogs and platforms.
- Political activism, public relations, and militancy in extreme cases, but also maintain internet presence for direct contact with the public

PUBLIC & VOTERS (Active)
- Create agendas & engage in active discussions across the various platforms of interest.
- Consume mediated political programs, but also solicit and consume direct response from political circles
- Follow political issues via alternative platforms; Participate in talks shows.

Political Actors: Are those individuals who aspire through organized institutional means to influence the decision making processes. They include political parties, political organizations, pressure groups (e.g. environmentalists, animal rights, human rights, labor unions, etc.), militant groups, etc.

Source: Original models by author (Hadiza Wada), © 2022

More recent changes within the last decade

Writing in 2008, two authors (Bennett & Iyengar 2008) described some changes in the manners of political communication, saying 'people have become increasingly detached from overarching institutions such as public schools, political parties, and civic groups, which at one time provided a shared context for receiving and interpreting messages' and as such, studies should focus on the newer modes of communication as these sources become more individualized. A few years later we see studies on individualized modes of political communication, such as a study (Aelst, Sheafer and Stanyer 2012) which probed the personalization of mediated political communication. The concept of personalization is used in

relation to the behavior of voters, political actors and the media, where in essence individual candidates and political leaders get prominence over their parties and organization (Karvonen 2010; Rahat & Sheafer 2007). By 2017, the famous publisher of academic text on political communication, Brian McNair, has argued the obvious; i.e. that 'an expanding public square and digital media has transformed political communication allowing political actors to bypass professional media (McNair 2017). These political actors include politicians, pressure groups, associations, and even terrorist organizations. Using the premise, the book analysed global political events of significance, such as the Populist movement in Europe, Brexit, and also the election of Donald Trump to the United States presidency in 2016.

An exception to the norm was a study on the media coverage of six European countries of Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom (Kriesi 2012) that shows 'no general trends' towards personalization when it comes to election campaigns in these countries. Further down in 2020, a study (Garzia 2020), tries to measure the effect of political leadership candidate on the success of right wing populist political parties. One of three findings show that among the populist radical right, leader effects are more important than for other voters. A more recent text on current status and challenges of the media and journalism in communicating politics in the present times (Perloff 2021) takes on issues and challenges of the 21st century, and even more recent changes in politics such as presidential communication, fake news and politics, covering challenges to democratic ideals including partisan polarization drawing from recent elections in 2020, for example.

For studies into the communication strategies or winning determinants of right wing radical right in recent elections, three scholars (Evans, Geius & Green 2021) examined the 2019 British election of Boris Johnson. The study 'focused on the highly successful accommodation strategy of the British Conservative Party within the context of the party's support for Britain's departure from the EU' and concluded that 'while these voters were motivated by anti-immigration sentiment and Euroscepticism in these European Parliament elections, one of the most influential factors in their subsequent votes for the pro-Brexit Conservative Party in the 2019 general election was the personal appeal of the Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.'

Theoretical framework

Theoretical approaches to political communication, e.g., the study of televised political debates, include democratic theory, agenda-setting, uses and gratification, argumentative and debate theories (Kaid 2004). In general, however, where communication and political studies converge since the early years of political communication, a lasting concern with communication effects is prominent, e. g. the effect of both broadcast and print media contents on voter's choice (Rogers 2004).

This study will lean more on uses and gratification theory to analyse the data from the survey of the voting age respondents and potential voters. Uses and gratification theory is valid on issues of changing media utilization environment. An older theory of mass communication popular during the 'limited effect' and 'active audience' era of communication research, its founding goes back to the 1960s, when Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail studied the United Kingdom 1964 elections and categorized people's motives for watching certain political programs on television. The theory has contributed a lot to our understanding of how media contributes its quota in the lives of its audience. The researches categorized under this theory have continued to enrich our understanding of the choice and utilization of media content by the general public/audience.

Recent uses of the theory, Uses and Gratification, regarding social media has, for example, discovered specialized gratification as far as alternative media usage. Authors (Whiting & Williams 2013) identified ten uses and gratifications for social media users which

include; "social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others."

Definition of terms

Alternative media: They are 'non-mainstream media' (Oxford), or media sources that differ from established professional media in their content, production, or distribution. Sometimes described as independent, or dissident, underground, non-corporate, progressive, grassroots, and/or activist etc., seeking political or social change.

Mediation: refers to the processes through which communication media produce and circulate symbolic content. (Lievrouw 2009). In short, as in another definition, mediation is what media do, i.e., seek, design, and propagate content for the public.

Personalization: It relates to the (increasing) amount of political actor coverage focusing on people and candidates compared with the attention devoted to political parties and issues (Wattenberg 1994).

Social media: Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking (Oxford).

Data presentation and discussion

To answer some basic questions about the subject matter of this research, the data from a survey of 289 voting age respondents was documented and analysed. The statistical breakdown of the respondents shows that a majority of them at 130 out of 289 are 26 to 35 years old (45%), while the second largest group was the 18-25 age bracket at 39% of respondents. As for their educational level 64% have attended university at 161 respondents, 56% of them have a graduate degree, and another 8% have a postgraduate degree. No respondent is illiterate.

One of the most significant findings is the high percentage of social and alternative media users, with respondents who indicated 'very active' use at 60% and averagely active at 30%. As to why they prefer alternative media over professional (mass) media, 44% of respondents believe the professional media contents are not relevant to them, while 29% say to them it is based on their choice to go with the current trend, while to 27% it's a result of costs (finances), i.e. subscription costs for professional media and other costs such as possession of television, etc. What is somehow unique to these age group compared to their counterparts elsewhere, most especially in developed countries is, they also source political information from professional media at a high rate. Watching (TV, video) rates highest at 101 or 38% of respondents, radio second at 33% and print at 29% of respondents.

Chart. 1 Respondents' reasons for choosing alternative media
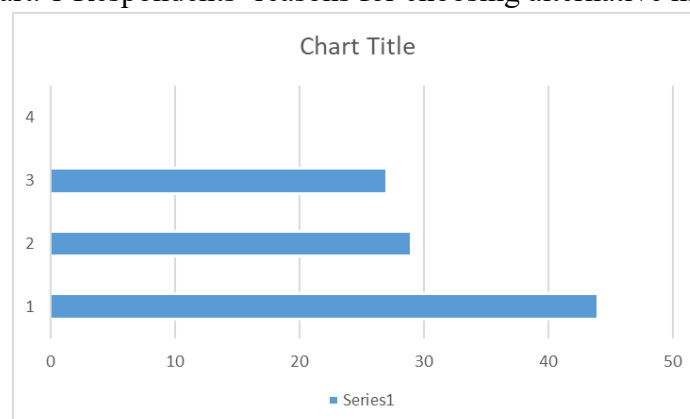
Item number 1. (lowest bar) in the chart above with 44% of respondents represents those who say professional media contents' relevance is at issue; while bar 2 (above it) represents those who say it is just their choice to stay with what is trending at 29%, and finally item 3 (top bar) with 27% of respondents who cite the cheaper option of alternative media as a reason for choosing to use it.

As to relevance of contents leading as a reason for deferring to alternative media, research is needed to find out whether it's a result of the sheer volume of contents these young adults are dealing with in the digital age, which additionally allows for them enough contents to skew things to their taste only – not necessarily what one may feel they are required to know to fully participate politically from a well-informed perspective. That finding also, non-relevance of professional media contents as a major reason for deferring to alternative media, is in line with an earlier study quoted in related literature (Haussle 2021).

As to whether the respondents get their political information from alternative media, 96% of them said yes, with only 4% saying no. But what is interesting is when asked whether they also use professional media in seeking political information, 94% say they do indicating a very high politically conscious group, complementing their habits with professional sources. For professional media, the preference for audio-visual (watch) was at 35%, Radio (listen) at 31% and Print at 27%. Satisfaction with the Nigerian politics and politicians is at best average, with dissatisfaction tipping the scale. Satisfied as a choice gets 102 respondents and very satisfied 37 with a total of 139 respondents (48%); while not satisfied at 108 and very unsatisfied at 42 has a higher score with 150 respondents (52%).

When asked whether they are 'actively posting, receiving and participating in discussions' 244 out of 289 respondents at 84% say 'yes,' confirming an earlier study (Sparks 2001) claiming that non commercialized public sphere is yearned for by citizens to exchange information. The high rate of use indicating political participation by the results of the survey prompted a deeper research into the Nigerian alternative media communication habits of the political class as well as highly visible candidates by the researcher. Our research shows that the current President Muhammadu Buhari, in his final year of the administration's second term, for example, has maintained various platforms. Some of them (The Buhari Media Organization) in existence even before 2014 when the merger of two opposition parties, Congress for Progressive Change, CPC and ACN, Action Congress of Nigeria to form APC (All Progressives Congress) that finally brought him into power occurred. All platforms stayed current all along, with daily posts from the President's special assistant on media and publicity, highlighting the President's daily activities.

Among others are the President's personal Twitter handle @Mbuhari (established 2014) with 4 million followers, the President's Facebook account with a million followers, platforms by political groups and supporter groups (Buhari Support Organization, The Buhari Centre, etc.); as well as other social media platforms such as Instagram (Buhari Osinbajo 2015), etc. Others that use alternative media actively include one of the most visible opposition leaders, former Vice President of Peoples Democratic Party, PDP, Atiku Abubakar who uses social media robustly such as Twitter (@atiku) to publicize his daily political activities directly to the public. His Twitter account registered more than 4 million followers too, so also a one million Facebook followers, matching the current President's followers as per both Twitter and Facebook official records.

Also notable is the Nigerian 2015 and later 2019 general elections registering a high participation of technologically savvy youths who mostly worked for the new opposition alliance party named All Progressives Congress. The younger voters' participation in 2015 general elections saw the creation of applications such as Zabe.ng promoting elections transparency, after the APC presidential candidate stressed and made popular the adage (*A kada a tsare*) 'vote and make sure it is counted;' and zabe.sr application for participants from among the public to report voting information and results as announced at voting centres in real time.

The active participation of the same age group was further confirmed (Olatunji, 2015) in writing for a national daily, *The Guardian,* a few months after the Nigeria 2015 general elections thus; "Having improved on the quality of the participants in the political system … the youths are however missing from the political space as active players (candidates), though many are active spectators as indicated by the high level of activity on social media."

Recommendations and conclusion

Relevance of content as a reason for deferring to alternative media by 44% of respondents is highly significant. The availability of specialized channels and niches in the digital market may be responsible, as the realization of its distraction towards entertainment has already allowed for the exploitation of that weakness by the infotainment genre. To stay relevant and excel, professional media must find ways to keep up with the various technological developments and user tastes. Other ways of motivating voters that appear to be more dissatisfied with the current state of politics and political activities may have to also be found, as the result of the survey shows significant dissatisfaction. Some of the related research cited also show a current skewing of spotlight to personalities in elections where populist strategy brought their candidates to success in the US Trump elections and British Johnson elections, a recipe for national issues exclusion that may lead to voter apathy (Evans et. al. 2021).

The word democracy coming from the Greek words "demos" (people), and "kratos" (power) means any country that practices democracy is supposed to set in place a system of government in which laws, policies, leadership, and major undertakings are directly or indirectly decided by the "people. The media is the primary institution, sometimes referred to as the fourth estate, in addition to the Executive, legislature and Judiciary to ensure enough crucial information is circulated for the smooth and effective running of democracy. This they do by tracking and keeping citizens informed about their government and its activities day to day. That role becomes all the more important when citizens are faced with choosing who holds all the major offices of governance and administration during electoral campaigns and voting.

The question of high participation at 84% of respondents admitting to 'sharing, posting and discussions' yet with a very significant rate of dissatisfaction with present day politics and politicians, more than anything else, confirms the present challenge, i.e., that political communication today, and under the present circumstances, is not translating into the required satisfaction citizens crave. Somehow and somewhere, these changes have created a vacuum that needs to be understood and addressed. Future research in this area should try to find out why higher public engagement and political participation via alternative and social media have not translated into an equally higher public satisfaction with politics and politicians.

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