

SOCIAL MEDIA MESSAGES AS POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

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Abstract

The research problem this study set to demystify is that even as vast literature exists on political communication and social media, it is unlikely that analysis of social media posts by the Independent National Electoral Commission has been done. Method of the study was content analysis which nine INEC posts on *Facebook and Twitter* purposively selected were analysed. Unit of analysis was textual elements that constituted the social media posts. The study revealed that the social media posts were simple, appealing, persuasive and apt with possibility of providing civic education to the Nigerian electorate. The study concluded that social media are indispensable in political communication as they create awareness, enhance election transparency and ultimately, build credibility and integrity of elections. The study recommends, among other things, sustained use of social media with potentials to galvanise the electorate for active political participation and improve integrity of elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: electoral process, electoral system, franchise, political communication, social media, technology

Introduction

At every election season, the need arises for intensification of voter education. This is because of the elusive knowledge about the processes and procedures the electorate are required to have for a seamless and widespread participation. While even some citizens of adult voting age may be familiar with the processes, some crucial changes that may be introduced to enhance the election integrity usually activate the need to update the electorate on these changes. Such changes could be associated with the existing number of political parties and candidates vying for different positions, time frame, duration and a whole gamut of activities and processes involved. For example, the recurring modifications in the digital processes involved in Nigeria's elections which are in direct response to the publics' clamour to democratise elections, especially the voting process amplify the dire need for voter education which can only be achieved through effective political communication. The adoption of Internet and Information and Communication Technology proves helpful in the 21st century electoral process. It expands the capacity of the media to provide quick and credible information as well as enhance transparency and integrity of elections. This probably inclined Ende (2013) to conclude that on several occasions, the media in their agenda-setting role have helped citizens to have an insight into the personalities of the political office seekers and their manifestoes as well as order of voting. The agenda media set factor in the several activities of different stakeholders including those of government and her concerned agencies.

Political communication can be defined as the inclusion of political elements into the communication process and the

implementation of all communication techniques, methods and tools around political elements (Dašli, 2019). On account that political communication is indispensable in elections, and considering the fluid nature of its definition, this study ascribes to the definition that simply relates political communication to voters and voting behaviour. The idea about political communication is essentially to influence behaviours of voters. Thus, political communication is a largely mediated communication, transmitted through the print and electronic media (McNair, 2003). Added to the print and electronic media is outdoor media. Print media comprise newspapers and magazines, while outdoor media are essentially billboards of varying types and sizes. Electronic media comprise radio, television, cinema, and social media which embody several platforms like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *WeChat*, *2go*, *Pinterest*, *Instagram*, and *YouTube*. All political communications conveyed through one or a combination of these media are aimed at influencing voter behaviour. The communicated message is not limited to the verbal or written statements, but also visual means of signification such as dress, make-up, hairstyle, and logo design, i.e. all those elements of communication which might be said to constitute a political 'image' or identity (McNair, 2003). These messages are eminently used especially at the eve of elections to galvanise support, sell a political party and its candidate, create awareness about the voting process, and mobilise voters to actively participate at elections.

Viewed this way, Denver (2007) makes it pellucid that as long as there are contested elections, those standing for election and their supporters endeavour to persuade the relevant electorate to vote for them using different means. Apart from politicians and their supporters, the electoral body (i.e. Independent National Electoral Commission, as in Nigeria) is considered an incontrovertible stakeholder that usually

mobilises citizens before, during, and even after elections. Thus, as elections become more competitive, politicians and relevant stakeholders seek more efficient means of communicating their messages. Work on the production process of these messages focuses on how messages are generated by political actors like parties and interest groups, and then transmitted through the mass media which consist of newspapers, magazines, billboards, radio, and television. The advent of Internet and social media has expanded the media space for political communication.

Social media are democratic in nature and provide opportunity for Internet users to transform to participants, who are disposed to the exercise of their civil rights and obligations (Sowunmi, 2013). In addition to use of social media by politicians and their supporters to canvas for votes, INEC uses social media to create awareness and canvass for support and cooperation. The decision is premised on the large population of 162 million out of the approximately 200 million Nigerians with mobile subscriptions which amounts to 89 million Nigerians with Internet access and approximately 22.4 million Nigerians, who are on *Facebook*, and 1.6 million Nigerians on *Twitter* (Idris, 2020). Given the statistics, online social media have become an important avenue for INEC to communicate and share information with citizens in general and the electorate in particular.

Giving perspective on use of social media at elections at individual front, Ogah and Ocholi (2011) point out that, a growing awareness of social media led to the first major social media campaign in Nigeria when Dr. Goodluck Jonathan opened a *Facebook* account for his presidential bid in 2011. Ogah and Ocholi (2011) are emphatic that Jonathan being inspired by the intrinsic role of social media in contributing to debates and serving as a platform for citizens to reason

together as well as the ability of social media to bridge the gap between the state and the society, went ahead to apply it to his campaign and governance after he won elections.

The Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, is the electoral body that midwives elections in Nigeria. It was established by the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Its functions are enshrined in Section 15, part 1 of the Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution (As Amended) and section 2 of the Electoral Act of 2010 (As Amended). The functions are to organise, undertake and supervise all elections to the offices of the President and Vice-President, the Governor and Deputy Governor of a state, and to the membership of the Senate, the House of Representatives and the House of Assembly of each state of the federation. INEC is also responsible for registration of political parties in accordance with the provisions of the constitution and Act of the National Assembly, monitoring organisation and operation of the political parties, including their finances; conventions, congresses and party primaries. Similarly, the body reserves the mandate to arrange for the annual examination and auditing of the funds and accounts of political parties, and publish a report on such examination and audit for public information. It arranges and conducts the registration of persons qualified to vote and prepares, maintains and revises the register of voters for the purpose of any election under the constitution; monitors political campaigns and provide rules and regulations which shall govern the political parties. By virtue of conducting voter and civic education, it similarly promotes knowledge of sound democratic election processes; and conducts any referendum required to be conducted pursuant to the provision of the 1999 constitution or any other law or Act of the National Assembly (INEC, 2019). Thus, at federal level is the mother body while at state level, the State Independent Electoral body reserves the mandate

to conduct hitch-free elections at the local level government subject to the Electoral Act.

It is the function of INEC to conduct voter and civic education thereby promoting knowledge of sound democratic election processes that have spurred research interest among researchers in the electoral body and Nigerian political system at large. However, a scan at literature indicates that most studies about Nigeria's political landscape are concerned with public perception and attitude on those in leadership positions (Fyfe & Crookall, 2010); influence of social media on political mobilisation (Ogah, & Ocholi, 2011), political communication and voting pattern of the electorate (Udende & Oyewo, 2015), and relationship between mass media, and political awareness and voting behaviour (Udende, 2011). There is likelihood that studies have not been conducted on analysis of social media strategies to educate electorate. An attempt made by Idris (2020) was skewed to social media and electoral integrity. This creates an existing research gap in political communication studies which this study seeks to fill. Attempt to carry out this study revolves around the following objectives:

1. identify social media platforms INEC used for civic education in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria;
2. identify social media messages INEC used for civic education in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria;
3. explain the social media messages INEC used for civic education in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The nexus between INEC, social media and technological determinism theory

This study finds relevance in technological determinism theory which

origin is traced to the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), who formulated the causal link between the technology and the society. The key denominator of the theory is that it seeks to show technical developments, media, or technology as a whole, as the key mover in history and social change (Kunz, 2006). According to the supporters of technological determinism, any social changes are controlled by the technology, technological development, communications technology and media (Hauer, 2017). Thus, as a pivotal force in society, technological development changes the way people think and how they interact with others.

The proponents of technological determinism argue that the society is influenced and shaped by technological development, which suggests that society has to adjust and adapt to new technologies and innovations (Hauer, 2017). But on account that social sphere conditions and determines technological development, there exists a bi-directional relationship between technology and society. This means the technology and the social aspect do not exist as two heterogeneous worlds or processes.

An offshoot of technology in contemporary society is social media that inevitably have become one of the best examples of technological determinism forecasted in Marshall McLuhan's theory, "the medium is the message". Even as modern theorists of technology and society no longer consider technological determinism to be a very accurate view of the way in which people interact with technology, the theory is significant to the study. Its applicability is located in the standpoint that with the advent of social media which indispensability is doubtless, the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, finds it useful in disseminating information that could enhance civic education among the electorate. After all, the modern information society arises as a

result of the development of innovations, new technologies and their social and political implications.

Nature of political communication

With the wind of democracy that has blown across the world, governments are fast adapting ways that will engender civic education. Hitherto the advent of social media, political communication in Nigeria used to be a one-way process where politicians, party members and other stakeholders would read out manifestoes, go for campaigns and roll out their programmes. There was really no way to show that the majority of the citizens had an opinion. It could almost be described as a one-way communication process because the election was seen as an affair between politicians, political parties, other stakeholders, and the media.

Nowadays, researchers (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2012) have shown that instead of relying wholly on the traditional mass media, the new forms of digital media have become an integral modern method of communication. Stieglitz and Dang-Xian (2012) have taken a step forward to carry out an analytic framework of social media and political communication. Other studies have demonstrated that the digital interaction has created the potential to increase democratic engagement to reach online audiences, who were previously disconnected from government activities. For example, a study by Clarke (2010) has revealed that social media have promoted more diversity in political discourse. To further extend the perimeters of political communication and social media, Dareen and Abu (2015) drew a conclusion that by allowing citizens to express their opinions, experiences and wisdoms, social media enable people to share the content between each other, to participate with their ideas and opinions, promote democratisation, and to publish their generated content and publicise it.

In recognition of the potentials of social media, INEC has since

incorporated social media in its civic education architecture and has carved a niche on social media platforms. Today, INEC is one of the most visible government agencies on social media with over one million followers on *Twitter* and over 315,000 followers on *Facebook*. In terms of civic engagement, INEC has 60% engagement on *Facebook*, 85% on *Twitter* and 30% on *Instagram* with some appreciable presence on *Google* (INEC, 2019).

Serious attempt by INEC to use social media began during the 2011 general elections when the electoral umpire revamped its website and set up social media accounts to allow for open interaction between the agency and the citizens. Since 2011, INEC has maintained a social media presence for interaction, information dissemination, political communication and citizen engagement. Lending a voice to INEC's usefulness of social media, a one-time INEC Chairman, Attahiru Jega, explains that:

ICTs enhanced transparency of the political process and made INEC more accountable to the public in its conduct of elections; strengthened oversight of the electoral process by empowering the public to alert INEC of incidents requiring swift security intervention; mobilised citizens, particularly the younger generation, to participate at every level of the electoral process; exemplifying potential to entrench and deepen our democracy (Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation, 2012, p.7).

The commission has also employed ICT tools to guard against cases of multiple registrations that hitherto marred elections. INEC equally makes use of ICTs platforms in enhancing effective flow of information. Idris (2020) identifies some of these to include use of its website (www.inecnigeria.org), *Facebook* page (facebook.com/inecnigeria)

with 401,816 followers, *Instagram* (@inecnigeria) with 103,000 followers, and *Twitter* ([@inecnigeria](https://twitter.com/inecnigeria)) with 1.4 million followers all as at February, 2020, and an email (@inec.gov.ng).

Its website has different sections providing valuable database of information for aspirants and candidates, election officials, voters, the media, researchers as well as links to its Citizens Contact Centre and Registration Area Centres Nationwide (inecnigeria.org). The website has information on all the registered political parties in relation to their top officials, addresss and contact telephone numbers. This is crucial to the electoral process and information sharing. Among the other critical resources downloadable from the INEC website is code of conduct for political parties (inecnigeria.org). A study by Abimboye (2015) has revealed that the INEC website has become so critical that when it was hacked for a couple of hours on presidential Election Day by a group known as Nigeria Cyber Army, it created anxiety across the country and beyond. INEC's technical staff, however, restored the website thus calming the apprehension.

Essentially, INEC's online accounts function as information dissemination platforms and tools of civic education and enlightenment, while also receiving feedbacks from the public on election-related issues. According to Odeyemi and Mosunmola (2015), the accounts also function as complaints response mechanisms, with the handlers responding promptly in most cases to issues of registration, non-functional smart card readers and the attitude of INEC personnel.

Apart from use of social media by INEC, studies show that with the advancement in technology and the recent evolvment in communication, politicians use the social media as a major means of passing information to several people. A study by Bucy and Gregson (2001) concluded that people now use the social media platforms as a

means to campaign, discuss politics, sell businesses, give and receive ideas, form public opinions, participate in civic discussions and agenda building, interact with candidates and other political actors. As a matter of convenience and necessity, interactive political and news sites allow individuals to participate in online surveys and immediately get feedback on how others feel about the issue (Johnson & Kaye, 2003). This has a similitude to the American experience where Smith cited in Stern and Rookey (2012) noted that in Obama's 2008 Campaign, national-level research has shown that 80 percent of respondents went online to find information about political campaigns in 2008. Stern and Rookey (2012) attributed the healthy development to people's ability to quickly and easily communicate with their social networks via email, *Twitter*, or *Facebook*, which in turn means that “mobilizing one's network, or being mobilized to vote or otherwise become politically engaged, could be easier than ever before. That is, information can be shared in ways that are faster and easier than in previous eras” (p.3). Probably inspired by this development, polls in Nigeria were also conducted through different social media platforms to see who would win before the date. People were asked to vote online so as to serve as a mock election and test the acceptance of major candidates of different political parties.

The fact that people use the media for information on political issues does not mean that the people completely trust the media. Moy, Torres, Tanaka, and McCluskey (2005) have conducted a study in which they found out that media reliance increases the likelihood of political participation through increased knowledge. Moy *et al* (2005), however, acknowledged that media reliance did not completely increase the trust of electorates in political parties or participants. This is to say that despite the noticeable effect of the media on people's abilities to participate, it does not necessarily mean that the citizens would support or oppose a

person based on media coverage.

Methodology

Content analysis was used to analyse nine social media messages INEC posted on *Facebook* and *Twitter* to educate citizens on election processes and other related issues. These messages were purposively selected since they meet the criteria for civic education during the 2019 general elections. Unit of analysis was textual messages comprising images and texts. The selected messages were descriptively analysed.

Analysis and Presentation

As elections approach, the need arises for INEC to recruit ad-hoc staff to augment the short fall of its staff. This forms the basis for the electoral umpire to open a portal for potential ad-hoc staff to apply online.

INEC Nigeria @inecnigeria · Jan 15
Breaking News:
INEC PORTAL FOR RECRUITMENT OF ELECTION STAFF

Supervisory Presiding Officer (SPO)
Registration Area Center (RAC) Manager
Presiding Officer (PO)
Assistant Presiding Officer (APO)
Registration Area Technical Support (RATSU)

Click here: pres.inecnigeria.org



Fig. 1: Twitter handle showing Inec portal for recruitment of election staff.

Source: Inec Twitter Page, @inecnigeria

As shown in fig.1, the portal is unequivocal about what it stands for as the text message boldly written in white colour with black contrast, “INEC PORTAL FOR RECRUITMENT OF ELECTION STAFF” for easy

comprehension of the message. Other textual elements include “Breaking News” at top left, signifying the momentous time the message was posted. Accompanying it are various positions for avoidance of doubt about the specific existing positions for suitable applicants. In addition to the INEC logo dotted all over amidst red marks, the portal does not conceal the exact point where to start the application process as it states just above the logo “Click here pres.inecnigeria.org.”

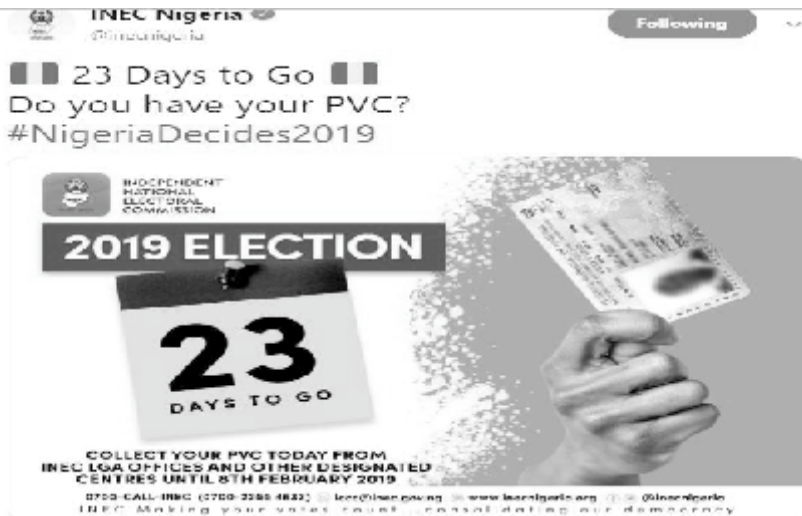


Fig.2: Inec call for PVC collection.

Source: Inec Twitter Page, @inecnigeria

Mindful of the fact that most Nigerian electorate suffer from attack of forgetfulness; INEC considers it conceivable to update the electorate with countdown to the Election Day. The multi-coloured (Nigeria and lemon green, black, milk, red, orange, white, and blue) garnished with several contacts and an alluring slogan “INEC Making your vote count...consolidating our democracy” that constitute fig.2 provide an appealing message. The key message posted on the INEC *Twitter* platform is that the electorate are left with just 23 days to start the 2019 general election. Given that a pre-requisite for any adult voting age to

participate in the exercise is to first acquire a Permanent Voter Card (PVC), the message reiterates this need meaning there was still room for those who were yet to acquire their PVCs to do so. The message stresses the urgency in the text just below the sign “23 DAYS TO GO”, that those who had registered but were yet to claim their voter cards should collect theirs “TODAY” at the designated places. To reinforce the indispensability of PVC, a human hand that brings in the dimension of realism clearly displays a dummy with personal picture and other relevant identifications. This message was posted exactly at “6:00 AM – 20 Jan 2019.”

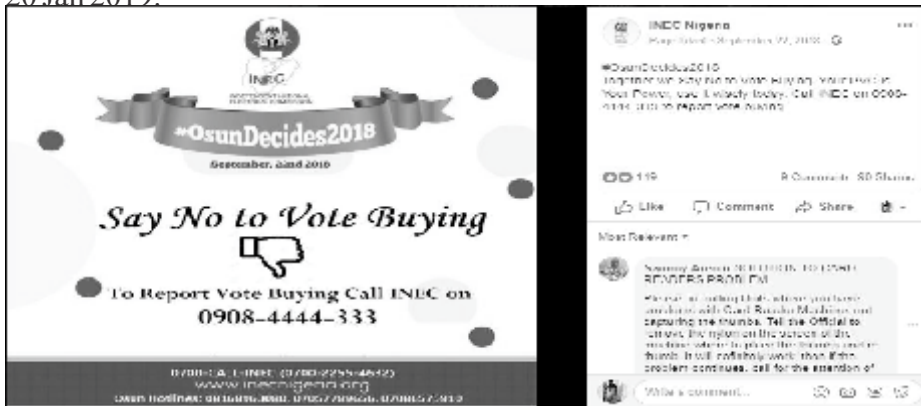


Fig 3: INEC Civic Education against vote buying.
Source: Inec facebook Page, @ INEC Nigeria

Predating the 2019 general elections was one of the staggered elections in some states scheduled to take place in Osun State precisely on “September 2nd, 2018”. Typical of this social media message is to orientate the electorate to desist from compromising the integrity of the election. The post made up of several texts has “OsunDecides2018” aesthetically crafted and presented in motto-like form with a green background. The predominant white colour contains the theme of the message “Say No to Vote Buying.” To further demonstrate the seriousness of INEC about the obnoxious practice of vote buying that infringes election credibility, a pointed thumb directs voters' attention to appropriate contact where cases of alleged vote buying could be reported for actions. Additional hotlines and INEC website provided on the green

strip complete the main INEC contact number. The messages on the right are reinstatement of warning against vote buying and remedy to card reader issues as they arise.

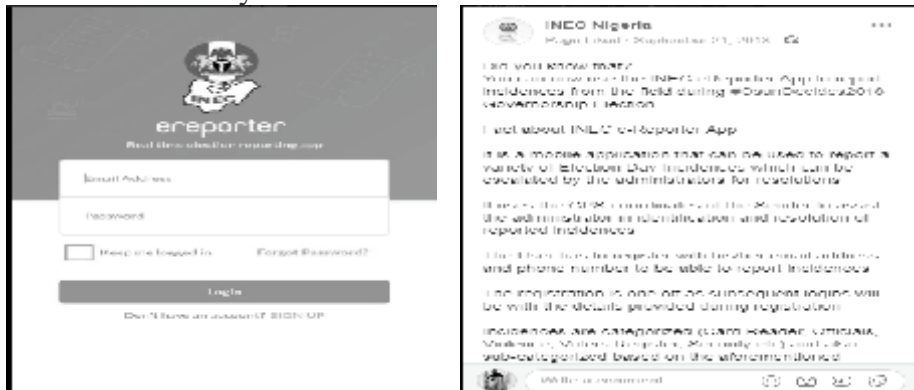


Fig. 4: INEC call for reporters to foster collaboration between the agency and the Citizens.

Source: Inec facebook Page, @ INEC Nigeria

During elections, collaborative efforts of all stakeholders for active participation to ensure free, fair and credible election is imperative. Against this backdrop, INEC found it necessary to provide a platform, “eregporter” where the citizens can interface with it to ensure a hitch-free election. The portal possesses simple log-in parameters such that once a voter logs in the INEC e-Reporter app, he or she would be able to register his or her concerns. The broad black vertical line divides the e-reporter application from other series of messages including a message that encapsulates all the messages thus: It is a noble application that can enable reporters report election day incidences which can be escalated by the administrators for resolution. This is suggestive that voters are privileged to instantly report to INEC, incidences and issues that come up in the course of elections.



Fig. 5: INEC campus outreach.

Source: Inec facebook Page, @ INEC Nigeria

Nigerian youths, most of whom are in institutions of higher learning constitute appreciable number of the electorate that should be engaged by INEC on issues of civic education. On this flier posted on *Facebook* platform presented in fig. 5, INEC organises an event themed “ENHANCING YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTORALPROCESS” with clear date and venue. Another message featured on the platform with background images of youths is “Youth Votes Count” which appears to be competing with another message, “CAMPUS OUTREACH”. Even as the message seems to be exclusively for students of Bayero University, Kano, students from other Nigerian higher institutions could grace the event. The programme features four panellists, three male and one female. The message on seal-like portion poses a probing question “Do you have a PVC?” Emphasis on PVC amplifies the significance of acquiring it as a gateway to exercise of franchise.

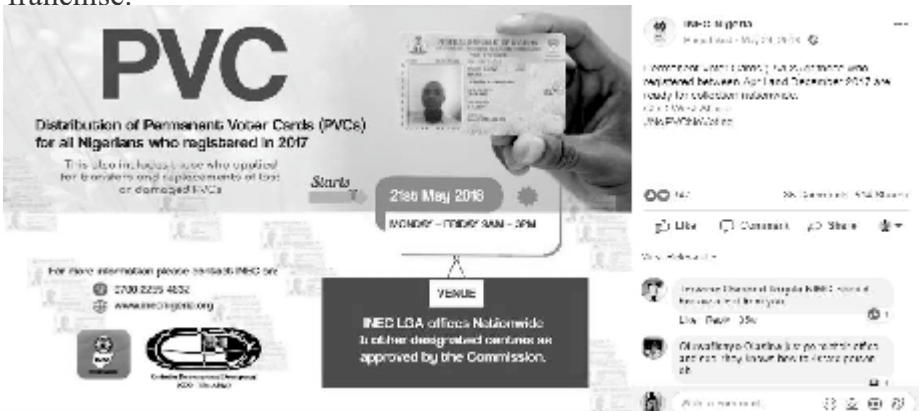


Fig. 6: INEC Disseminating Information for PVC collection.

Source: Inec facebook Page, @ INEC Nigeria

On its *Facebook* page, the main message is “PVC” boldly written to remind voters on the importance of the card at elections. The main message directed to those who had applied for transfer or replacement of damaged PVCs shares space with a replica of a hand-held PVC. The hand creates impression of originality, reality and believability. The text that follows is explicit about the “Distribution of Permanent Voter Cards, PVCs for all Nigerians who registered in 2017”, suggesting that there were unclaimed permanent voter cards and affected persons should go and claim them. INEC re-assures the electorate when the exercise would commence (21st May, 2018) as contained in the green colour pointing to

the time frame (Mondays to Fridays between 9am and 2pm). The larger squared green colour at the bottom depicts the venues for collection spelt out as INEC LGAs offices nationwide and other designated places. INEC contacts are also provided for inquiries. By virtue of this post, some Nigerians appear not to value voter card probably due to confidence and trust deficit in the conduct of elections in Nigeria.

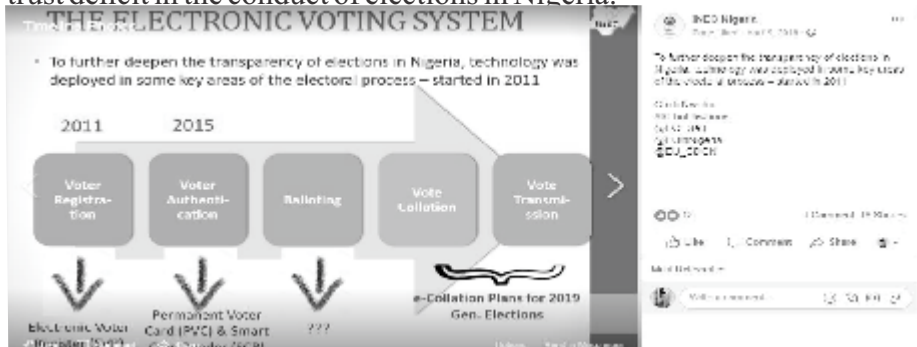


Fig. 7: INEC education on electioneering process.

Source: Inec facebook Page, @ INEC Nigeria

Each election circle comes with modifications geared towards improving on the conduct of previous elections. In order to keep voters abreast with the electoral process, INEC posted on its *Facebook* page the innovations it has entrenched in the electoral system with specific reference to “THE ELECTRONIC VOTING SYSTEM” that debuted in 2011. A rider to the main message rationalises that the innovation was to further deepen the transparency of elections in Nigeria through technology. The page demonstrates the process that began in 2011 with electronic voter registration up to issuance of Permanent Voter Card and ultimately, introduction of Smart Card Recorder to track votes cast. With these innovations, it is hoped the process will climax with electronic voting as time progresses.



Fig. 8: INEC information on Voting Procedure.

Source: Inec facebook Page, @ INEC Nigeria

Often, many Nigerian voters are ignorant about the election voting process. On the INEC *Facebook* page fig. 8; INEC logically takes the electorate through the “VOTING PROCEDURE”. By virtue of this post, even those who are illiterate can benefit from explanations by the literate around them who could have been exposed to the message.



Fig. 9: INEC app for information and update.

Source: Inec facebook Page, @ INEC Nigeria

Fig. 9 presents a glamorous smart phone placed against a large screen with the name “INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION” just below INEC logo, top left. The main text, top right reads, “Download my INEC from the latest news information and update from INEC”; available at *Google play*. This application could be meant for the rich, it does not discountenance the valuable message that information about INEC can be easily accessed. A cursory look below the smart phone is INEC's slogan, “make your vote count ...consolidating our democracy.” The slogan which is a charge issued to the electorate implicitly suggests that it is not enough for the electorate to cast their ballot and disappear from the election venue but they should stay back to witness the outcome of the exercise.

Discussion

Unlike developed countries like United States of America and the United Kingdom where election system is automated, the same cannot be said of developing countries like Nigeria. In Nigeria, attempts are only being

made to key into trending technology reputed to guarantee fair, transparent and credible elections. Even then, the low-level of literacy, among other factors, tend to mar elections in Nigeria. Recognising these intervening factors, the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC, that umpires elections in Nigeria has taken a bold step to utilise opportunities offered by the social media to engage citizens. Through such platforms like *Twitter*, *Facebook*, and *Google*, INEC's presence is being felt as the analyses shows. INEC's use of social media affirms Kaplan and Haenlein's (2012) assertion that nowadays, instead of relying wholly on the traditional mass media, the new forms of digital media have become an integral modern method of communication.

Beginning with INEC's post on its *Twitter* page shown on fig. 1 is the call for prospective ad-hoc staff to apply for recruitment. The reason for this call is not far-fetched. INEC has limited staff and elections, especially general elections, require a large staff force. This is why INEC relies on ad-hoc staff to complement its own personnel for registration of persons qualified to vote and prepare, maintain and revise the register of voters, as well as conduct actual elections. Thus, INEC was being proactive in 2019 by floating the advertisement on its *Twitter* page. This function of recruiting capable election workforce that falls within the ambit of the inalienable mandate of INEC conforms to its right to arrange and conduct the registration of persons qualified to vote and prepare, maintain and revise the register of voters for the purpose of any election under the constitution (INEC, 2019).

As part of its mandate to provide civic education by creating awareness about significant milestones at different phases of elections, INEC as a matter of its deliberate policy provides a countdown to the commencement of elections. The need arises because the average Nigerian electorate are busy with series of activities that preoccupy their minds such that election dates tend to be elusive. It is on the basis of this that INEC posted a reminder on its *Twitter* page that only 23 days were

left to start the 2019 general elections as fig. 2 shows. Emphasis on the Permanent Voter Card, PVC is not out of place either. For one to exercise one's franchise, the card is a pre-requisite and up to the time INEC posted the reminder, the probability of many people, who were yet to claim their PVCs was high. In addition, the INEC *Twitter* post could be said to have come at an auspicious moment because members of the electorate were almost always indecisive on the party and candidate to vote until the D-day. Similarly, the post served as good reminder to candidates vying for various political positions to round up their campaigns. A related civic education by INEC is shown on fig. 5. The INEC *Facebook* page depicts a flier inviting students in institutions of higher education to a sensitisation programme aimed at enhancing youths' participation in the electoral process. The planned engagement of Nigerian students was probably premised, not only on perceived political apathy associated with students, but also on their numerical strength capable of determining the direction of votes cast in an election.

It suffices to state that vote buying is anathema to elections. At different elections in Nigeria there are rampant cases of accusations and counter-accusations of vote buying. This is suggestive that political parties, candidates and their supporters go at any length to win elections, even if it means deploying the illegal and illegitimate vote buying culture. As a key stakeholder, INEC considered it incumbent to caution those with intention to perpetrate the ignoble act in the scheduled Osun State election in particular. Experience shows that this has been the practice in all other elections earlier conducted. INEC's use of social media in this regard was to further avail the electorate the opportunity to report to it through INEC website and contact numbers. INEC's social media campaign against vote buying conforms to the advantages of social media and Information and Communication Technologies as

encapsulated retrospectively by Attahiru Jega that ICTs enhanced transparency of the political process, made INEC more accountable to the public in its conduct of elections, and mobilised citizens, particularly the younger generation, to participate at every level of the electoral process. (Shehu Musa Yar'Adua Foundation, 2012).

Apparently, the INEC's *Facebook* page shown in fig. 4 amplifies its use of social media to enhance election credibility. Part of the textual message extols the app as a noble one capable of enabling reporters to report Election Day incidences as soon as they erupt before they escalate. This is suggestive that voters are privileged to instantly report to INEC, all malfeasances that arise in the course of elections. The feedback mechanism is in affirmation of what Odeyemi and Mosunmola (2015) note that the accounts also function as complaints response mechanisms, with the handlers responding promptly in most cases to issues of registration, non-functional smart card readers and the attitude of INEC personnel.

Even as Permanent Voter Card, PVC, is displayed and mentioned in five posts out of the nine INEC social media posts analysed (see figs. 2,3,5,6 and 8), the message on figs. 2 and 6 uniquely stress the importance of PVC. Comparatively, while the post in fig. 2 does not have PVC as the main message, the opposite is the case with fig. 6 which central message is on PVC targeting those who had applied for transfer or replacement of damaged PVCs but were yet to claim them even as the PVCs were ready. The accompanying text that follows elucidates that INEC had commenced distribution of the Permanent Voter Cards, PVCs, for all Nigerians, who registered in 2017 but were yet to claim them. For the information to come up in 2018, a year after the time applicants had applied, curiously explains the less importance some electorate attach to election issues. Broadly speaking, the use of social media to amplify

these messages affirms the technological determinism theory which provides the anvil on which the study is forged.

An election cannot be successful without knowledge of its procedures. These procedures constantly change subject to vicissitude in the technical and political landscape. In Nigeria like elsewhere, the need to key into technology for a transparent and cost-effective electoral process inclined INEC to introduce Information and Communication Technology and ever since, has been exploring potentials of social media to provide civic education to the electorate. This is consistent with a basic tenet of technological determinism theory which holds that technical developments, media, or technology as a whole is the key mover in history and social change (Kunz, 2006). It is, therefore, not accidental when INEC posted on its *Facebook* page the innovations it had entrenched in the electoral system with specific reference to “THE ELECTRONIC VOTING SYSTEM” that debuted in 2011 (see fig.7). The page is explicit on the phases of election automation in Nigeria beginning with the 2011 electronic voter registration. A similar post with a bias in the election voting process appears on INEC *Facebook* page (see fig. 8). Logically taking the electorate through the “VOTING PROCEDURE” affirms what INEC (2019) posits that by virtue of conducting voter and civic education, it similarly promotes knowledge of sound democratic election processes.

Even as INEC chooses to showcase a glamorous smartphone that can be used to download a variety of information about it, one should not be disillusioned that the message is strictly for the rich. The smartphone may implicitly typify functionality and not necessarily, luxury. More importantly, attention should be on quality information which can be downloaded with other handsets and computers. Therefore, the vast available information and updates INEC offers on *Google* downloadable

with phones is to enrich the level of awareness and education of the electorate for informed political decisions at elections.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The general conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that the changing media landscape which has led to introduction of the Internet and social media both of which have come to stay. These structures make possible for unrestricted political communication. The strategies political actors like politicians, party supporters, civil societies, and other key stakeholders like INEC may differ, the bottom-line is to create awareness and provide informative knowledge to citizens in general and the electorate in particular. Therefore, individuals, corporate organisations, and government and its agencies averse to use of social media as political strategy would be doing that at its political suicide.

Thus far, the study contextualises and articulates the meaning and nexus between social media and political communication with close reference to INEC, Nigeria. The study identifies and analyses various social media posts INEC made specifically on *Facebook* and *Twitter*. One is not left in doubt on the potential efficacy of these strategies characterised with feedback mechanism for INEC's response and improvement on its electoral processes and procedures, as well as the electoral system.

Apparently, INEC's intense use of social media as political communication strategy to provide civic education has stimulated interest in political activities among the Nigerian electorate. Given the various contacts in the guise of INEC website or phone numbers, citizens are privileged to make inquiries as they please them. Fundamentally, in view of the rising Internet and social media penetration in Nigeria, the untrammelled access to social media that amplifies social media use as

political communication strategies, it is suggested that all stakeholder should not relapse from social media use especially before and during elections.

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