

EXPLORING POLITICAL PARTIES ON FACEBOOK: LITERATURE REVIEW OF THE TWO MAIN POLITICAL PARTIES IN GHANA

John Demuyakor¹

Abstract

Ghana currently has over 25 registered political parties. The two key political parties in Ghana are the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC). Before the introduction of social media, especially Facebook, political parties in Ghana employed traditional communication strategies, such as TV, Radio, and News Papers, to execute political communication. However, since 2012 political parties in Ghana have deployed and relied heavily on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, as a political communication tool to disseminate their political manifestoes to the electorates in order to clinch political power.

This article adopted a purely descriptive approach with an emphasis on document analysis to review relevant information and literature for the study. Hence literature is sourced from secondary sources like a pool of online libraries, political party's websites/Facebook pages, and other scholarly research related to the subject under investigation. The objective of this paper is to carefully explore political parties on Facebook, emphasizing the two main Political parties in Ghana, thus the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC).

Key words: Ghana; social media; political communication; Facebook; political parties; New Patriotic Party (NPP); National Democratic Congress (NDC)

INTRODUCTION

The increase in social media usage has attracted a lot of analysis from social science [Pulido et al., 2018 and Felt, 2016]. According to a report by Internet World Statistics, 2020, it is estimated that 3.6 billion of the world's population will be using social media by the end of 2020 and expected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025. Social media platform such as Facebook is expected to register more than 1.90 billion account users by the end of 2020. The information transmission process has drastically changed in recent years, with the inception of social media. Before, a significant barrier to communication was how to disseminate fast information within and across nations, especially those in the developing world [Boulianne, 2015]. However, the post-American internet era, has seen countries like; China, India, and Russia developing their internet technology. This has led to the partial removal of internet access bottlenecks [International Telecom-

1 Institute of Communication Studies, Communication University of China, Beijing, China,
Email: tevezkantzoids@outlook.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6084-6951>

munication Union, 2020]. Social media relevance in contemporary political communication has brought about a massive shift in the usage of the fundamental of traditional public communication styles [Van Aelst, Walgrave, 2017].

Van Aelst and Walgrave, [2017] again cited that traditional communication was some sought of a top-down approach, customarily initiated and managed by actors. The actors include businesses, politicians as well as journalist. Besides, other fields of study, such as political science and information communication technology (ICT), are classified as key areas of study that use social media so much. Wihbey [2015], Mensah, [2017] and Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, [2013], contended that the high demand and growth of social media usage in recent years, specifically Facebook and Twitter, is associated with the increased rate at which ordinary citizens and political actors have deployed in their everyday activities. It is well acknowledged that think tanks, political foundations, politicians, and political parties, have recognized social media as the efficient and cost-effective means of communicating their policies and programs to the electorates and other interest groups.

Mensah, [2017] and Gyampo, [2012], have argued that since the introduction of social media about a decade and a half ago, political participation has increased. It is reported the citizens of most democratic countries now have a stake in the day-to-day management of their respective countries due to the upsurge in social media use. Election years are always characterized by high demand in social media utilization in most democratic practicing nations such as Ghana. Some scholars also hold that some political parties and politicians adopt social media before, during, and after elections to build opinions from general electorates on the effects of their programs and policies. According to some experts, political communication enhances the bottom-up approach to communication and enables political parties to have candid feedback from the civilian population.

Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, [2013], also reported that, within this concise time frame, political parties and politicians in contemporary democracies worldwide had deployed social media to interact and reach out to the constituents. Wattal et al., [2010] cited that the use of social media as a political communications tool was manifested and popularised in world politics when the former US president Barack Obama, successfully adopted social media in this 2008 election campaign and won. Facebook's online and live features are alternating; for instance, aided political parties, politicians, and other political authorities to solicit feedback from the voter population on the perceptions of the governance process [Bimber, 2014]. Wattal et al., [2010] and Bright et al., [2019], believe that, Facebook strategy adopted by the 2008 US presidential candidate Barack Obama and who later became President to canvass for political power as the turning point in the history and application of political communication in political activities in recent years. Since 2008, political parties worldwide have increased their dependence on social media on the bid to prosecute their electoral campaigns and diversify from the traditional one-way communication strategy that was previously adopted by political parties [Bright et al., 2019]. Social media strategy adopted by political parties has enabled party supporters to have direct interactions with the leadership of their various political groups [Stier et al., 2018 and Lee et al., 2012].

The objective of the study

The objective of this paper is to explore political parties on Facebook, with emphasis on how the two major Ghanaian political parties; New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) used Facebook as the main political communication tool during elections.

Methods and Materials

Primarily this article adopted a purely descriptive qualitative writing approach with an emphasis on a document review, which enabled the researcher to analyse various related literature on how political parties use Facebook as a strategic political communication tool in Ghana. Baillie, [2019] and Holly, [2014] described the descriptive qualitative research as a means of accurately and systematically describing a population, phenomenon, or situation through observation and document review. Hence, the article's relevant information is secondary sourced from a pool of online libraries, political party's websites, social media handles, or pages, as well as a review of other scholarly research related to this study. This article adopted document analysis because it helps the researcher to organize systematically, collect and interpret verbal and textual data, which is described as a suitable criterion for judging the quality of a research paper [Hammarberg et al., 2016].

Out of over twenty-five [25] registered political parties under the 4th Republic of Ghana, only two are very active. Political power in Ghana under the 4th Republic, from 1992 to date, alternates every eight [8] years between the National Democratic Congress [NDC], New Patriotic Party [NPP], and this explains why they are only parties having representation in Ghana's parliament. Therefore, this study purposively samples and analyses how these two political parties utilize social media platforms as campaign strategies to carry their ideologies across to its supporters in Ghana, especially run-up to the 2020 general elections.

Political parties on Facebook in Ghana

In most democracies, especially those in developed and developing countries, social media platforms like Facebook are considered the key measure of citizens' participation in the governance structure [Mensah, 2018]. This tremendous role of the Facebook in our democratic dispensation was exhibited during the 2008 US general elections, where the youth groups and political parties capitalized on social media as a communication platform to "sell" the programs and policies of the Democrats [Stier et al., 2018 and Druckman et al., 2014].

According to Mensah [2017], Gyampo, [2012], and Dzisah, [2014], political news on Facebook in democratic nations such as Ghana attract much audience and readership than other stories. The advent of social media in Ghana about a decade ago has significantly impacted the country's socio-political landscape. Some social media and political experts hold a strong opinion that the use of Facebook in Ghana has dramatically shaped democratic credentials and deepened political inclusiveness or participation in the country [Mensah, 2017 and Gyampo, 2012].

Since 2012, political parties in Ghana have employed Facebook as the most appropriate avenue for conducting impartial political debates and the comparison of development achievements. Civil society organizations and other key political actors seeking accountability and transparency in the country have had the chance to participate fully in the governance process due to Facebook [Dzisah, 2014].

In Ghana, the total number of internet users is more than 14.76 million, equating to about 40.8% of the Ghanaian population. In contrast, Facebook users are estimated at 6 million as in the second quarter of 2020, according to [Digital, 2020, and International Telecommunication Union, 2020]. Mensah, [2017] and Gyampo, [2012], cited that, social media, especially Facebook was crucial in the 2016 national elections of Ghana between the president and candidate for the National Democratic Congress [NDC] Mr. John Mahama and the opposition candidate, now President for the New Patriotic Party [NPP], Nana Addo Dankwa Akuffo Addo.

The current President, then-candidate for the opposition party, won the election by

over one million votes during the 2016 general elections in Ghana. This landslide-victory by the NPP's candidate was partly credited to social media's deployment, particularly Facebook. A considerable number of citizens within the voting age in Ghana are classified as "floating-voters", thus, people who do not owe political allegiance to any political party but are eligible to vote. Such a group of voters in Ghana use Facebook to monitor political party manifestoes to make their voting decisions [Mensah, 2017].

According to Stier et al., [2018], Miller et al., [2016, P.155], Bimber, [2014], Facebook has shaped the course of public opinion in most democratic nations. Adopting these social media tools has led to a considerable increase and influence in Ghana's political activities. The distribution of social media platform users in Ghana are; Facebook [42.9%], Twitter [29.38%], and 19 million use WhatsApp, and [41%] of all users fall between [25-35] years of age. Therefore, this implies that the impact of social media on national elections and party politics, in general, can ever be underestimated. In every electioneering year, Facebook usage among political parties usually peaks three months before the general elections. Political manifestoes and key national development programs of the various political parties are debated via social media, particularly Facebook. Every election year, key non-state actors such as civil society organizations, opinion leaders, and other interest groups use social media to preach and educate citizens on the need to maintain peace before, during, and after elections. As Ghanaians are preparing for the general election in December 2020, the political party's social media subscription has increased considerably. Therefore, it is not out of place for one to conclude that the use of social media by political parties' in Ghana continues to increase from one election year to another.

How the two main political parties and their presidential candidates' use Facebook in Ghana

A recent report by Internet World Statistics (IWS) indicated that, as of June 2020, there 7.03 million Facebook users, accounting for about 22.6% of the total population in Ghana. Political parties and their Presidential aspirants in Ghana relied heavily on social media, particularly Facebook, to articulate them manifestoes and interact with voters one-on-one via live streams.

In recent years, political parties and political candidates have adopted Facebook to organize fundraising and disseminate party programs to convince voters [Stier et al., 2018 and Ndavula & Mueni, 2014]. It reported that the Democrats party and its presidential candidate Barack Obama made great use of social media to support American voters in the 2008 general election. Bimber, [2014] and Stier et al., [2018], posit that the chances of winning political elections are dependent on the effective political communication; therefore, political parties in recent years have reported and relied heavily on social media as the first-choice strategy for communicating to the electorates.

According to Bimber, [2014] and Bright et al., [2019], the prominent social media platforms such as Facebook have offered political parties the opportunities to marshal the needed political communication strategies woo prospective voters. Again, Bright et al. [2019] noted that in recent years, social media outlets are used by political parties' world over as one the most resourceful means of providing education on their intended policies and programs to their teaming supporters. In 2016, a presidential and parliamentary general election in Ghana, for instance, social media use, was unprecedented.

Going into the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections, political parties and their flagbearers have adopted various social media platforms to canvass for votes. About political parties are currently registered with the Electoral Commission of Ghana to compete in the forthcoming elections in December 2020. Out of this number, only the two dominant political parties can be elected into office. Since the beginning of the fourth republic in 1992, only the National Democratic Congress and the New Patriotic

Party have ruled the country and created a tradition of rotating political power every eight years. Both the NPP and The NDC have had Facebook pages, with over 6 million followers both in Ghana and abroad used for political communication purposes.

Besides the political parties, both leading candidates have also deployed Facebook for live broadcasts of their policies. The two leading candidates for these 2020 elections are:

The current President, Nana Akuffo Addo, is also known to be a serious social media user for his interaction with the Ghanaian population. He has more than 1 million followers (Facebook, 2020). In his re-election bid, he is using Facebook hashtag #4More4Nana.

John Dramani Mahama, the opposition leader and the presidential candidate for the NDC, has over 1 million Facebook followers and makes great use of Facebook for this political campaign. He captions his Facebook encounter with the citizens as the "moment of truth" which is telecast twice a week on Facebook Live.

Since 2012, the two main political parties in Ghana, the NPP, and NDC, have used various social media, especially Facebook, as a political communication tool to canvass for political power.

The usefulness of Facebook in the political communication environment can never be underestimated. In Ghana, Facebook is the leading social media Apps used by political parties to disseminate essential political manifestoes and policy directions of the various political parties to win or sustain parties in power. Political party's positions on very pertinent national issues, such as health, education, economy, among others, are also communicated to the teaming party supporters and the general public through the power of social media [Gyampo, 2017].

Essel, [2020], and Gyampo [2017] hold the view that; political parties use Facebook as an advocacy tool for communicating party policies to the general voting population. Before the advent of social media, political parties had significant challenges using mainstream media such as print, TV, and Radio. According to some political parties, a fundamental problem is related to the limited coverage of the traditional media platforms, which prevent some sections of the public from getting access to political parties' political programs. For instance, most political parties, especially the two leading parties in Ghana, use social media to communicate their manifestos and policies.

The NPP's candidate and the current President, use Facebook live to address the nation. The opposition NDC's flagbearer for 2020 general elections, Mr. John Dramani Mahama, hosts a live Facebook program dubbed "moment of truth", which is intended to educate the electorates on the programs of the party and the need to vote the NDC into office in December 2020. These political communication strategies via social media offer the citizenry the opportunity to "comment", "like" and ask questions on some of the country's developmental issues [Essel, 2020, and Braimah, 2019].

Due to the seriousness and instant feedback, politicians get from the use social media platforms for political communication, political parties in Ghana have attached to social media as a political communication tool, some political parties such as the NPP and NDC have recruited social media content managers to create and manage various Facebook pages to propagate the manifestoes of political parties. Mensah [2017] belief that prominent platforms like Facebook are powerful. Some traditional media outlets (Radio, Newspapers, and TV) now heavily depend on the vibrant Facebook platforms to source news and other information for the audience.

William, [2017], alluded to the fact that Political parties in Ghana deploy as a primary political communication strategy for soliciting opinions from the general public and party faithful's on very topical national issues affecting the socio-political development of the country. As a democratic country, public opinion forms a very integral part of the daily management of the nations. Therefore, the adoption of social media in the political

landscape of Ghana, since 2012 has strengthened and empowered millions of citizenries to participate in the national development plan to ensure transparency and accountability. The level of feedback from social media in politics is instantaneous and provides leadership the opportunity to react to constructive criticisms on key national issues that need to be redressed.

In the run-up to 2020, elections, for instance, one key issue that has engaged the attention of political parties on Facebook is the proposal by the electoral management body to change the voter's register. The Electoral Commission of Ghana has raised critical issues of the credibility of the voter's register. Besides, the question of credibility, the commission has also raised concerns of the register been over-bloated with names of minors and names of other West African nationals register going into the 2020 elections with the old voters' roll compiled in 2012. While in power, the [NPP], supports the electoral management body [Electoral Commission of Ghana] decision to change the voters register for the 2020 general elections, some opposition parties, led by the [NDC], are strictly opposing the proposed change. The opposition claims the move to change the voter's roll is a deliberate attempt to rig the elections for the ruling party [NPP]. Hence, the electoral decision to change the voter's register is a majoring trending issue, in which political parties and their flagbearers have resorted to Facebook platforms to debate this key national issue for several months.

Facebook platforms are also used as an avenue for mobilizing funding and membership support for the political party's activities. It is argued that due to broader coverage of media platforms, political parties can register all its members. Some scholars hold that; Facebook is the cheapest means of mobilizing members of a political party. The Facebook group platforms created; also help political parties to mobilize financial resources to support the party's political demands. Political parties are run on the dues and the donations from members. In the past, it was quite challenging to get political party members to pay membership dues; however, the adoption of platforms like Facebook has helped the political parties in Ghana mobilize funds to embark on their political agenda [Mensah, 2017, Essel, 2020, Gyampo, 2017].

The levels of political consciousness among the youth in Ghana have also received a considerable increase in numbers; this positive development is attributed to the "mass" and extensive use of social media among the youth groups. The proliferation of Facebook as a political communication tool in Ghana from 2012 onward has made the Ghanaian voter sophisticated and very descending than ever. Facebook has also made it possible for the political parties to quickly disseminate its programs to the rural and hard to reach communities in the country. The regrettable facts about the use of Facebook in party politics have not translated much to the party's winning political power. Some scholars have described the adoption of Facebook tools in Ghana's political landscape as necessary but not sufficient tool for winning political elections. It is mostly said that "elections in Ghana are won at the polling stations and neither on traditional media nor social media platforms such as Facebook".

Political parties on Facebook in Ghana: Challenges

Despite the tremendous roles Facebook plays in the political party's political communication strategy, there are still some drawbacks. Social media are characterized by false publication or hoax, fraud, scams, lies, defamation of people, among others [Spears et al., 2015].

Another critical opinion of political parties using social media as a political communication tool is that Facebook audiences are face-less; hence, it is complicated to do damage control in case of false publications.

Conclusion

The deployment of social media applications, as a political communication tool for political engagements, is crucial for the socio-political development of most democratic countries, including Ghana. One cannot deny that the Ghanaian political parties have also accepted and integrated social media platforms in their bid to win political power. From this paper, one can conclude that the dominant parties in Ghana, - NPP and NDC have made so much use of social media. Some schools of thought also believe that, due to limited internet access, many Ghanaians do not use social media. Other factors, such as poverty and illiteracy, are also a significant hindrance to parties' adoption of social media as a strategic political communication tool. A good number of Ghanaian political parties still rely heavily on traditional media outlets like Radio and TV to "prosecute" its political activities. Some political and communication experts have recognized that social media is used as an avenue by the youth for trading insults on those in authority. The "misuse" of the social media is gradually destroying the beautiful Ghanaian culture of "respect for elders and authority".

Despite the numerous challenges, political parties are using social media as a political communication strategy to attract electorates. Many scholars still hold a firm believe social media has the potential to improve and build on the democratic dispensation in Ghana. Social media is a flexible and has enabled a significant number of civilian populations to participate and express themselves on key national issues. As a growing innovation, many scholars believe the impact of social media on the political party's activities does not have a massive influence on the two dominant parties' political fortunes, even though social media is a necessary tool for advancing political communication.

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