YOUTH AND POLITICAL APATHY: LESSONS FROM A SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM

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ABSTRACT
These days, voter apathy is widely known to characterize the conduct of politics even in advanced democracies. This general apathy is witnessed among all social categories but is especially ripe among the youth. Governments and political office seekers in democratic countries are for this reason having to look for fresh and novel ways to get eligible voters among their populations but especially the youth or first-time voters to participate in politics and governance. In these countries, besides the more immediate reward of electoral victory for the individual or party that successfully mobilizes apathetic or first-time voters, governments are equally well aware that opinion polling is an essential barometer for evaluating governance and for gauging the pulse of the people on issues. Nigerian government has been trying out ways and means to get the citizens and youths to take an interest in its politics and policies. Setting up the National Orientation Agency (NOA) is one such experiment. But how successful has the National Orientation Agency’s e-polling platform been at interesting the Nigerian youth to participate in politics and governance? This question was at the heart of this study of the undergraduate students of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka and the National Orientation Agency’s e-polling platform. It employed the survey method. Data was collected through questionnaire. Findings point to low awareness and image problem arising from the perception of NOA as government’s propaganda machine to be impediments to youth participation in NOA e-polling. The study concluded that the effectiveness of the practice of e-polling in the country will depend on its improvement.

Key words: e-polling, youth, participatory communication, National Orientation Agency, new media

INTRODUCTION
More than a decade ago and in fact ever before the Arab Spring or Barack Obama’s victory in the US presidential elections of 2008, a victory credited largely to his application of technology in the mobilization of young or first time voters, Agba’s (2002, p. 253) observation that the “application of information and communication technology concepts, techniques... has become a subject of fundamental importance and concern to nations” has something of a prescient echo. Today, the world is witnessing a revolution in communication with the social media among the prime drivers. Hasan H., & Pfaff, C. (2006) productively catalogued the new media as including websites, audio and video streaming, chat rooms, e-mail, online communities, web advertising, DVD and CD-ROM media, virtual reality environment, Internet telephony, digital cameras and mobile computing.
As already noted, the power of the new media for information sharing and mobilization for action is lucidly exemplified by the much cited Arab Spring that began in December of 2010 and swept dictators of long standing out of power sometimes with disastrous consequences for the dictator: Ben Ali of Tunisia went into exile, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt endured months of humiliating show trial along with his two sons and was finally sentenced to do time in prison, and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya was killed by the same longsuffering Libyan people that he for decades subjugated. And although they have now largely petered out, but the ‘Occupy Movements’ seen in some western countries as the United States of America (Occupy Wall Street being perhaps the best known), Spain, Greece, etc, were in the main mobilised for through the social media. The Nigerian government had a first-hand experience of the power of the social media in the practical expression of public opinion against its policy seen in the ‘Occupy Nigeria’ Fuel Subsidy Removal Protests of January 2012 and in the 2014 Bring Back Our Girls online protests. The Chibok school girls’ abduction by the extremist Islamic group, Boko Haram, described by the British Prime Minister, David Cameron, as ‘pure evil’, generated much online international outcry over the fate of the girls and outrage at the Nigerian government’s apparent lack of action to the point that the Presidential Spokesman, Mr. Abati, dubbed it the ‘Hashtag Tyranny.’ The Chibok school girls’ tragic situation that equally galvanized people of all ages and cultures in Nigeria into real world protests, protests banned in May 2014 by the President Goodluck Jonathan administration over ‘security concerns,’ and other protests across the world, underscore the argument of some writers (Williams and Tedesco 2006; Tufekci and Wilson 2012) about the potential of the social media in helping their users become more engaged in political and public affairs.

In the age of smart phones, participatory technologies and other Internet-enabled devices, political participation and political content creation is no longer the exclusive preserve of any particular demographic. Neither is political content creation a linear form of communication any longer; it is instead participatory communication that encourages public discourse through civic and political participation.

Scholars have for some time now been paying attention to specific forms of contents. Studies as those of Gueorguieva (2008), Zhang, Johnson, Seltzer, & Bichard (2010) focused on applications as blogs and social networking sites. Other studies as those by Hargittai & Walejko (2008); Lenhart, Horrigan & Farrows (2004); Leung (2009) attended to website creation or blog, uploading of photos, artwork, writing, or audio and video files and the Internet.

E-polling or ‘the generation of information about current events or public affairs that potentially favours the public discourse’ (Bachman, Correa and de Zuniga 2012, p.7) is an aspect of content creation. The main features of e-polling are dissemination of economic and socio-political information, e-voting, and participation in e-decision making. In this increasingly interactive and user-generated web, engaging in these creative activities are necessary for the democratic agenda because new media users potentially become not merely consumers of content, but also participatory citizens (Livingstone, 2004).

The general idea therefore behind e-polling is that it would afford citizens the opportunity to participate in decision-making. Citizens can in the comfort of their homes air their views on topical issues. Electronic opinion polling can equally be a catalyst for a robust democratic process making possible the transition from passive information provision/discussion to active citizen participation. In a world where political voting is in large part treated with cynicism, e-polling with its unique quality of making the polling of opinion more convenient, is seen as having the potential to increase citizens’ participation in governance. Sophisticated gadgets like smart phones, iphones, ipads, and tablets, etc, will also lead to an increased citizen participation in politics. The quality of political deliberations and plebiscitary form of decision-making would equally become feasible. With objectives that include providing citizens with access to information and knowledge about political process, services and choices available as well as making possible the transition from passive information provision/discussion to active citizen participation, e-polling can be a catalyst for a robust democratic process. In relation to the new media, this is a perspective that has already been expressed by some observers of current trend in modern democracies. Blumler and Coleman (2001) are, for instance, of the view that the new media, or more specifically the Internet, has the potential to fundamentally change democratic politics and democratic citizenship. The new media can facilitate easy and universal access to information, a condition that is prerequisite in the democratization of the process of agenda-setting and in increasing citizens’ participation in politics. It equally makes for e-democracy or the use of the new media for democratically selecting political leaders, making public policies or both (Johnson and Perlmutter 2010).
Voting in elections is one practical demonstration and evidence of citizens’ participation in politics. Voter turn-out in some countries including even advanced democracies as the United States of America can be low sometimes. With regard to the US mid-term elections this is not up to 50% in some cases. In developing countries like Nigeria, where elections are at best a mockery of democracy, any claims about voter turn-out are to be treated with a great deal of caution. Fraud, lack of transparency, and distrust of government are some identified reasons for voter apathy (Ajibola, Adewole, Jimoh and Oladipo, 2013, Filno 2010). It is toward the effort at reducing electoral fraud and the consequent voter apathy that e-voting is seen as an alternative (Olusola, Olusayo and Olatunde, 2012). And though the authors argue that e-voting can only be applied in reference to political elections and referendum and not necessarily to e-polling, participation in e-polling should be seen as being broadly indicative of potential or latent attitude to electoral voting whether electronically or manually done.

On the other hand, e-democracy is seen as the use of the new media for the purpose of democratically selecting political leaders, making public policies or both (Johnson, 2006). E-government which as Noveck (2003) has noted has the potential to improve democratic participation and overcome political alienation can work at three levels: government-to-government, government-to-business and government-to-citizen.

E-communication on its part encourages two-way communication and permits user interaction. User interaction is the critical component that marks e-communication from offline communication. Although he was writing in connection with education, but it is this situation where citizens have neither hand nor choice in formulation of policies aimed at them that Babalaye (2013) described as the banking approach. Used in the context of education, banking approach describes a situation in which the student was viewed as an empty account to be filled with “knowledge” by the teacher. This is the opposite of “electronic republic” where the power of the individual citizen is increased through greater access to those who represent them in the political system and where the individual has greater influence over issues, decisions and legislations that might affect him/her. When this becomes possible, so then will e-government or the use of information and communication technologies to enhance the accessibility to and delivery of all facets of government services and operations for the benefit of citizens, businesses, employers and other public services delivery system (Toe, Srivastava and Lijiang, 2008) become.

About the National Orientation Agency

The National Orientation Agency (NOA) is an agency under the Federal Ministry of Culture. NOA is given the job of interpreting government programmes and policies for better understanding and acceptance by the Nigerian citizens as well as the provision of timely feedback to government. Cognizant of central role of effective communication in good governance at all levels and in keeping with the mandate of the National Orientation Agency, its Director-General, Mike Omeri, initiated the e-polling platform to facilitate citizens’ political participation. Since its creation, the Agency from time to time polls citizens’ opinion on topical political and socio-economic issues.

The National Orientation Agency has a three tier structure aligned to the federal structure. Accordingly, the Agency is made up of the National Headquarters, has Directorates in the 37 States/FCT and 774 Local Government Offices. These elaborate and grassroots structures have made it possible for the Agency to reach the majority of Nigerians. It is important to note that because of diversity in language, religion and culture, programmes at state and local government levels are adapted to conform to local peculiarities but without losing their substance and intended message. In addition, the Agency’s activities at the grassroots are meant to enhance popular participation through consultation with relevant groups in the communities.

The enabling Act establishing the National Orientation Agency outlined a number of objectives to be achieved and functions to be undertaken by it. These objectives and functions can be summarized into these key areas:

- Feedback: The Agency has a strong feedback mechanism which it uses to provide government with information on people’s feelings and reactions to policy issues. With regard to the study, two types of this feedback mechanism are relevant:
  a) Pulse of the Nation Report: This is a fortnightly report which encapsulates the reactions of people to government policies and programmes in all the tiers of government. The report, which originates from the Chief Orientation and Mobilization Officers (COMOs) to the state and
federal levels, also serves as a feedback channel through which the citizenry contribute to policy making and governance.

b) Special Report: This is a periodic report of unexpected problems, incidents and events of special national interest which sometimes are of emergency nature. In other words, these are reports that require immediate and urgent action. These reports are also circulated within 24 hours. On account of this important function, the National Orientation Agency is a member of the Joint Intelligence Board (JIB)

- Peace education and social justice: The National Orientation Agency is engaged in ensuring that peace, tranquility and respect for rule of law is achieved in the country. Its goal is also to ensure equity among different class/ethnic group/religious groups.
- Public enlightenment and social mobilization: This function entails keeping citizens informed and abreast of government policies and programmes and getting them to participate in achieving a specific goal of the government.
- Value reorientation and promotion of national values: Promoting and preserving core national values like the National Flag, the Coat-of-Arms, the Pledge and the Constitution is of great importance to the Agency. Little wonder the Agency adopted 16 September every year as a National Symbols Day.
- Political and civic education: One major objective of the National Orientation Agency is educating Nigerians on political issues and enhancing active political participation. The Agency also ensures that the masses are made aware of their civic obligations such as voting in elections and obeying national symbols. It was for this reason that Prince Afam Anene, the Director of Political and Civic Education of the Agency said on AIT’s socio-economic/political program Kakaki on October 1st 2012 that Nigerians must re-orientate themselves. It was also toward this effort that the Agency initiated the “Do the right thing campaign”, a ‘charge’ to the individual and the nation in general, as Prince Afam Anene also explained.

Methodology
The study’s population was the undergraduate students of 14 faculties of Nnamdi Azikiwe University. The choice of undergraduate students was informed by the continuing problematic of youth political apathy. Perhaps insights from students’ perception of the NOA e-polling platform could provide some of the answers that lie behind youth disinterest in electoral politics of the country. With respect to Nigeria, this apathy is at odds with youth’s active participation in political activism and their well known willingness to be co-opted, especially young males, by desperate political office-seekers, into undemocratic acts such as violence and vote rigging during elections.

From the 14 faculties in the university, 5 faculties with a population of 5544 students were purposively selected. Taro Yamane’s (1967) formula for sample selection was used to arrive at the sample size. The formula is statistically worked out:

\[ n = \frac{N}{N+1} (e) \]

\( n \) = Sample size
\( N \) = Number of total population of sample area (5544)
\( e \) = Error tolerance

\[ n = \frac{5544}{1 + 554 (0.05)^2} \]
\[ = 5545 (0.0025) \]
\[ = 13.8625 \]
\[ = 5544 \]
\[ 13.8625 \]
\[ = 399.9 \]

The figure 399.9 was then approximated to 400. This means that 400 became the sample for the study. Eighty (80) respondents were then purposively selected from each of the five faculties. This information is represented in the table below.
A seven-item questionnaire was developed for the purpose of data collection and was administered to the 400 respondents. The respondents were asked whether they had access to the Internet, the medium through which they would usually access the Internet, whether they were aware of NOA’s e-polling platform, how they perceived the e-polling platform, and whether they thought their participation in e-polling could be transferred into participation in real world political activities like voting.

Of the 400 copies of questionnaire administered to the sample, 376 copies representing 94% were completed and returned while 24 copies or 6% were not returned. This means that analysis of data was based on the 376 copies of questionnaire that were returned. Frequency and percentage table was also used for data presentation.

Data Presentation and Analysis
For convenience of analysis, this part of the study is divided into Sections A and B. In Section A, the respondents’ demographic and other sources of information were first presented in prose rather than the tabular format. Section B presents responses from questionnaire items specifically constructed to address and capture the purpose of the study. It is also pertinent to point out that while selecting the sample, because gender and year of study were not considered paramount to the research objective, there was no methodological strategy to achieve gender balance or representativeness. Accordingly then, of the 376 respondents, 162 representing 43% were male, while 214 respondents representing 57% were female. And concerning the faculties from which respondents were drawn, 76 respondents representing 20.2% were from Social Sciences, 77 respondents or 20.4% were from Law, 80 respondents or 21% were from Art, 76 respondents representing 20.2% were Mass Communication students, 20.4% were from Law, 18% from Philosophy, 21% from Public Administration while 20% were from department of Adult Education. Regarding the year of study, 158 respondents representing 42% were first year or 100 level students, the highest in the category. One hundred and five respondents (105) representing 27% were in 200 level, 65 respondents representing 17% were in 300 level and 34 respondents representing 9% were in 400 level while 14 or 4% were in 500 level.

Section B of the analysis focuses effort on presenting and analyzing data from specific questions asked the respondents. The subsequent table presents data on respondents’ access to the Internet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above table, 349 respondents representing 93% said they had access to the Internet, while 27 respondents, representing 7% did not have access to the Internet. A preponderance of the respondents had access to the Internet.

Next respondents were asked the medium through which they would normally access the Internet. The subsequent table represents this information.
Table 3 M
edium for accessing the Internet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Phone</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Computer</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cybercafé</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the table above, 265 respondents representing 70% said they accessed the Internet through their mobile phones, 62 respondents or 16% said they did through their personal computer and 13% accessed the Internet through cybercafés. From the above data, it is apparent that mobile phones are the respondents’ number one gadget for accessing the Internet. The next question was on whether the respondents were aware of the existence of the National Orientation Agency’s e-polling platform. This information is also presented in the next table.

Table 4: On whether the respondents were aware of NOA’s e-polling platform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the above table, 247 respondents or 66% said they were not aware that NOA’s e-polling platform existed while 129 or 34% said they were. It is therefore clear that not up to half of the sample was aware of the existence of the National Orientation Agency’s e-polling platform. The next table presents the data on the respondents’ previous participation in NOA’s e-polling.

Table 5 On respondents’ voting record

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>FREQUENCY</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that 122 respondents representing 32% had voted on the platform before while 254 respondents representing 68% had not. It is apparent from the last two tables that there is a close correspondence between respondents’ awareness of the existence of the NOA e-polling platform and their voting record. In other words, there is a correlation between respondents’ awareness of the existence of the NOA’s e-polling platform and their participation in e-voting. Almost the same number of participants who said they were aware of that NOA’s e-polling platform existed had voted on the platform. The next table presents the data on respondents’ perception of NOA’s e-polling platform.

Table 6 Respondents’ perception of NOA’s e-polling platform

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Government’s propaganda tool</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Agency</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that 199 respondents or 53% saw NOA’s e-polling platform as a propaganda tool of government, 47 respondents representing 12% saw it as an independent body, while 130 respondents representing 35% were not sure how to categorise the e-polling platform. Next, the respondents were asked whether their participation in e-voting could translate into a real world participation in the governance of the country through voting in elections. The subsequent table presents the data generated from the last question.

Table 7 On whether respondents’ participation in NOA’s e-polling could be carried over into participation in real world governance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From the table above, 124 respondents representing 33% felt their participation in e-polling could be carried over to real world politics through participation in voting. 58 respondents representing 15% did not think so while 194 respondents representing 52% were undecided. The last question the respondents were asked was whether they thought future administrations in Nigeria would sustain the NOA e-polling platform. The subsequent table presents respondents’ responses to that question.

**Table 8 Respondents on whether future Nigerian governments would sustain NOA’s e-polling platform**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12 shows that 88 respondents representing 24% thought future Nigerian governments would do so, 72 or 19% did not think so while 218 respondents representing 65% could not make up their minds.

**Discussion**

A case study, understandably, should make no assumptions about the generalizability of its findings to other populations. However, findings from a case study could provide pointers in some important directions and in relation to this study, pointers regarding the thinking of youth on electoral politics and the government. For instance, 124 respondents or 33% affirmed that their participation in NOA’s e-polling platform would make them take an interest in electoral politics, 52 or 15% of the respondents did not think this was going to be the case, while more than half of the respondents, 199 or 52% were undecided. Undecided voters in real world electoral politics are unpredictable. They could become swing voters or not vote at all. The preponderance of respondents who could not respond in the affirmative or negative to a simple question requiring a yes or no answer supports the argument about the occurrence of political apathy among the youth, apathy that can sometimes be the result of lack of trust in the government’s programmes and policies. The distrust could also stem from the perception of a programme or policy as a government’s propaganda tool, as is the case with the National Orientation Agency’s e-polling platform in the study. Some questions could generate responses that provide insights into what youth think of the government and indirectly the reason behind their lack of interest in politics. Answers to the last question on whether respondents thought future Nigerian governments would sustain the NOA e-polling platform is a good example. Eighty-eight (88) respondents or 24% were optimistic that future administrations in the country would sustain the NOA e-polling platform, 77 or 19% were less optimistic while 216 or 65% were undecided. Although 216 or 65% undecided respondents could not definitively be claimed for either position because as earlier observed, undecided voters in the real world electoral politics can swing their ballots and the outcome of a poll in either direction or keep to their initial position of not voting. Yet the negative or undecided responses could add up as well as point to an unexpressed view of government as an institution with a disposable culture or a throw-away approach to policies and programmes. Equally instructive is the fact that nearly all the respondents, 349 (93%) out of 376, had access to the Internet and most (265 respondents or 70%) said the mobile phone, a communication device possessed by most students in the university, was the medium through which they accessed the Internet. Notwithstanding, a majority of the respondents (254 or 68%) had never voted on the NOA’s e-polling platform because they (247 respondents or 66%) were not aware the platform existed. And so apathy towards government programmes could also be due to ignorance on the part of the people about the existence of such a programme. In relation to this study, apathy towards government programmes could also result from people not trusting government in power sufficiently enough to continue with programmes of previous administrations. As earlier observed, findings from a case study as this could serve as a useful pointer to, whether clearly articulated or as-yet-to-be-articulated, youth attitude towards government’s programmes as well as youth’s view of government’s approach to programmes.

**Conclusion**

Polling citizens’ opinion on topical issues has always been a problem in Nigerian politics and yet participation is an integral part of the democratic process hence the need for citizens’ input in the country’s programmes and policies. The qualities of accessibility make the new media a crucial tool for political and
social engineering. With about 45 million Internet users in Nigeria, (Nigeria Tribune, 25 April, 2012) the highest in Africa and many of them undoubtedly young people, the Nigerian government could do well to harness the potentials of the new media. In contemporary democracies, participatory governance is paramount in decision making processes. E-polling has a potential for increasing participatory governance. National Orientation Agency’s electronic polling platform can become a vital tool for increasing participatory governance in Nigeria. But unless more efforts are made to create awareness about its existence, change audience perception of the platform as government’s propaganda tool and address other challenges capable of rendering the platform politically ineffective, National Orientation Agency’s e-polling platform will probably remain an ineffectual tool for political and social mobilization.

REFERENCES