NEW MEDIA AND YOUTH'S ONLINE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN NIGERIAN POLITICS: POTENTIALS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the place of the new media in promoting online civic engagement among the Nigerian youths. Situated within the framework of the democratic-participation and the uses and gratifications theories of the media, the paper acknowledges that the new media possesses the potential to engender online civic engagement among the young people population through offering them a platform for acquiring information necessary for civic participation; for engaging in political discussions/debates in an atmosphere of enhanced freedom of speech; for direct conversations with elected representatives; for pushing for change; and for achieving group mobilisation. The paper, however, argues that before the new media could effectively perform these roles, certain factors must first be addressed and these include the extent of the youth's interest in politics, the conduciveness (or helpfulness) of the political environment and the responsiveness of the government of the day to the civic engagement cause. Once these issues are properly sorted out, the paper believes, the potentials of the new media as a catalyst for youth online civic engagement would be better realised.

Keywords: New Media, Online civic engagement, Politics, Nigeria, Youths

Introduction

Communication is so vital to the proper functioning and growth of human society that no activity of humans could be effectively carried out without it (Bittner, 1989; Eyiuche, 2003). Among these activities of humans to which communication is indispensable is civic engagement. Civic engagement refers to the process whereby citizens participate in the governance of their political entity (Adler &Goggin, 2011). In the case of Nigeria, such political entity could refer to the federation, a state or a local government. At whatever level of governance, nevertheless, civic engagement ensures that citizens are carried along in the governing process.

With the new media, however, new opportunities for strengthening civic engagement online particularly among the youths who are considered to be Internet savvy have been initiated. The new media are considered a "balancing force" according to Lin, Bagrow, and Lazer(2011) to the traditional media, to which activists and the underprivileged can turn or must turn in order to have their voices heard. The new media thus represents a radical shift in human communication culture through liberalising the communication space and making interactive communication possible in such a mass level as has never seen before. It is observable that political participation is increasing throughout the world through the use of social networking sites. As Vitak, Zube, Smock, Carr, Ellison and Lampe (2011) maintain that online political participation has been shown to predict real-world political participation.

Social media is quickly becoming prime political battlegrounds for several political contenders.This is because it has a democratic potential that opens for new forms of political participation and conversations.The popularity of online spaces has led to an increase in visibility of political opinions, which is also fostering online participation.The Internet for instance is changing young people's political outlooks and participatory behavior. For a number of young people, online participation is a gateway to meaningful engagement in political life, as some communication scholars have noted that social media elevate political efficacy, knowledge, participation and social capital (Kim and Geidner 2008; Utz 2009; Valenzuela, Park and Kee 2009).This paper, therefore, explores the strengths of the new media as a potential engenderer of civic engagement among the Nigerian youths who are more likely to contribute and consume the new media contents as well as underlying factors that could determine how effective social media becomes in aiding such civic engagement among the young people population.

The New Media: An Overview

Defining new media has been somewhat problematic chiefly because the term refers more to a form of functionality than to any particular type of communication hardware. In other words, the term is used more in reference to a particular kind of communication process than in reference to any piece of communication technology (Nelson, 2011). According to Wikipedia (2014), "New media refers to on-demand access to content anytime, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, and creative participation." The new media primarily refers to the Internet but its scope extends beyond the Internet, meaning that certain technologies that are not Internet-based are also considered part of the new media. Common new

media platforms include blog (such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc), world wide web, e-mail, etc.

Discussing the radical impact the new media has had on human communication process,Neuman cited in Croteau and Hoynes(2003: 322)states that the new media has:
- Altered the meaning of geographic distance.
- Allowed for a huge increase in the volume of <u>communication</u>.
- Provided the possibility of increasing the speed of communication.
- Provided opportunities for interactive communication.
- Allowed forms of communication that were previously separate to overlap and interconnect.

A key distinguishing factor between the new media and the old media is the form in which the message comes. Commenting on this, Jasen (2010) writes:... in print media, the products are either a newspaper or a magazine. Similarly, in the electronic media, the products are either a news channel, an entertainment channel or a sports channel... In new media, the product is called a *website*. Every website has an address. To see a website you need a computer. On every computer, there is an icon called internet explorer. You have to click on it and a new screen opens up. On this, you type the address of the website and it will open up for you. Then you can see and read whatever is posted on the website.

Besides, the new media is characterised by its interactive nature. Interactivity is a fundamental attribute of the new media. This attribute makes feedback immediate and makes communication horizontal as against the top-down orientation of the old media. In this vein, Jasen (2010) observes that new media "is known for its ability to involve the audience. This is known as **interactivity**. Hence, we can say that compared to other media forms, new media has the most evolved feedback system in place." In addition to feedback, there are two other things that make new media very special: The first is the way things are written. New media uses a **narrative** style of writing. A narrative is a story. All of us like to read stories or listen to stories. If serious issues are written in the form of stories, more people are likely to read them and learn from them. The other special feature of new media is the use of **multimedia**... whenever stories are supported by cartoons, moving pictures, sound and music, it is called multimedia (Jasen, 2010).

An Overview of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a term that explains the process whereby citizens participate in the governing process of their political community or nation. Also known as civic participation, it has been defined as "Individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern"

(Wikipedia, 2014). In their definition of civic engagement, Adler &Goggin (2011) say; civic engagement refers to the ways in which citizens participate in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future. This term civic engagement in past few years, involved a new movement to promote greater civic engagement by older adults but nowadays it has been used primarily in the context of younger people. Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.

Ehrlich (2000) sees it from a moral perspective; as a duty of an individual to be a contributory member of his/her society. In his words:A morally and civically responsible individual recognizes himself or herself as a member of a larger social fabric and therefore considers social problems to be at least partly his or her own; such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate.In other words civic engagement has many elements, but in its most basic sense it is about decision making, or governance over who, how, and by whom a community's resources will be allocated. The principle of civic engagement underscores the most basic principle of democratic governance, i.e. that sovereignty resides ultimately in the people (the citizenry).

Discussing civic engagement's intrinsic tie with democracy, Adler &Goggin (2011) note that it denotes civic cooperation in an atmosphere of equal rights. They maintain that civic engagement is about the right of the people to define the public good, determine the policies by which they will seek the good, and reform or replace institutions that do not serve that good. Civic engagement can also be summarized as a means of working together to make a difference in the civil life of our communities and developing the combination of skills, knowledge, values, and motivation in order to make that difference. It means promoting a quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.

Civic engagement can take many forms - from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others in a community to solve a problem or interact with the institutions of representative democracy (Wikipedia, 2014).

Theoretical Framework
In order to create a framework for this paper, the theories of democratic-participant and uses and gratifications will form its theoretical

bases. While the democratic-participant theory offers a normative imperative within which the media (including the new media) could be viewed as a platform for civic engagement, the uses and gratifications theory underscores the fact that the audience's media use dispositions are also a factor in the extent the media could serve in engendering civic engagement.

Democratic-Participant Theory

As one of the normative theories of the press, it is an alternative politico-media ideology that aims to democratise access to the media in challenge of the monopolistic tendencies of the powerful political and economic forces operating in the society.The emergence of the theory is motivated by discontentment with the libertarian media theory or free press and the social responsibility theory. Such discontentment arose because of their failure to achieve social benefit anticipated for them. The two theories have also failed to stem the increasing tide of commercialization and monopolization of the privately owned media. They have also been unable to prevent the centralization and democratization of public broadcasting institutions even when they have been founded according to social responsibility norms.

The democratic-participant theory thus represents a radical effort to neutralize all sorts of monopoly in media gate-keeping, therefore accommodating popular participation as represented by the diverse societal interests like students, labour, political parties, gender groups and religious bodies, among others. The theory is a direct answer to the emergence of "monopoly journalism" as a result of "extreme commercia1ization" of the media in the developed world (Okunna, 1999). Okunna comments further as follows: (The) private media have become increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer individual owners or ownership syndicates. Thus, in spite of the existence of pluralism (as also advocated by the libertarian theory), the mass media voices which are available tend to speak with one voice because a number of media outlets may belong to the same owner or ownership syndicate (Okunna, 1999, p.122).

Daramola (2003, p.99) writes that the democratic-participant theory "advocates pluralism as against monopolization and decentralization as against centralism... It also suggests horizontal as against up-to-down communication. It stresses its commitment to feedback in socio-political communication circuit... This theory has been described as the press equivalent of 'grassroots democracy'.'"The theory also advocates equality between sender and receiver or what has been called association mode as against the command mode or superiority of the sender to the receiver in a one way communication system. The theory equally observed that given the fact that the mass media has become too important socially, it should not be

left in the hands of the professionals. This theory has been described as the press equivalent of grassroots democracy.

Applied to the subject of this paper, the democratic-participant theory helps to conceptualise the new media as a platform for popular democratic participation where the common people excluded from the bureaucracy-permeated traditional media would have opportunity to make their contribution to governance. The new media, by virtue of its dynamics, naturally lends itself to popular participation (Jaffe, 1995).

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory holds that the nature and extent of effect of the mass media on the audience is conditioned by the uses which the audience make of the media. As an effect theory, Melvin (1999)writes, there are three objectives in developing the uses and gratifications theory:

- To explain how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs. "What do people do with the media?"
- To discover underlying motives for individuals' media use.
- To identify the positive and the negative consequences of individual media use.

The bottom line of uses and gratification theory is that media do not do things to people; rather, people do things with media. Specifically the objective of uses and gratification theory, according to Burgeon, Hunsaker& Dawson (1994, p.374-375), is to explain how individuals use mass communication to gratify their needs. Putting it analogical, the theory explains why one person rushes home, for example, to stay up late at night to watch the local news or read a medium. In the words of Ojobor (2002, p. 20), "All the discussions before now had emphasised what the media do to people. To embrace the interactive relationship between the media and the audience, the discussion at this point changes to what people do with the media."

The uses and gratifications theory also highlights the positive consequences of individual media use. In their contribution, Baran and Davis (2001) conclude that audience members actively seek out the mass media to satisfy individual needs. These include learning, passing time, companionship, escape from tension, excitement and relaxation.In other words, the theory is an alternative paradigm, a challenge to the old thinking that saw the media as irresistibly forcing itself on the audience. This old idea had inspired earlier theories like the hypothermic needle, mass society and social control – which all conceived the audience as a helpless absorber of media messages. Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974),identify a key figure in the development of this theory, called attention to the need for a functional uses and gratifications approach to understanding media effects. They write

thatuses and gratifications theory is concerned with the social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other source, which leads to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in need gratification and other consequences, mostly unintended ones.

The theory holds that the audience's use of the media is principally inspired and shaped by the benefits which it looks forward to by consuming specific media messages. Ojobor (2002) elaborates on this point:...people don't just buy papers or listen to radio or view television programmes just for the sake of doing so. There must be expectations of some gains from the programme or publication. The theory therefore is concerned with how people use the mass media to satisfy their needs. The theory is based on the assumption that the audience is proactive and seeks media that satisfies their needs; that people choose what they want to see or read and that different media compete to satisfy each individual's needs. For example, if we watch the 9 o'clock network news on channel 10 everyday and like the newscasters or their rendition, that means we seek gratification of news by watching channel 10. As we gain experience with segment of the media and create a cyclical process that reverts us back to watching the news everyday on the same channel.

Baran (2002, p.384) andDevito (1991, p.477) reveal that mass media audience make active use of whatever the media have to offer. Subscribing to the tenets of the uses and gratification theory, Bittner (1989, p.380 – 381) who drew from one of the earliest studies on the uses of the media conducted by Herta Herzog, describes the gratification the audience receive from watching programmes. According to him, viewers use programmes as entertainment as well as a tool for social interaction with others; and this condition them to be part of the viewers' routine. Similarly, with the media, audiences reduce tensions and also solve their personal problems. Quoting Wright (1974), McQuail (2005, p.424) adds that the media serve the various needs of the society, which include cohesion, cultural continuity, social control and large circulation of public information of all kinds. This pre-supposes that individuals also use media for related purposes such as personal guidance, relaxation, adjustment, information, and identity formation.

Folarin (1998:65) reinstates that since members of the audience are not passive users; they influence the effect process by selectively sieving the plethora of messages and retain the ones that serve their individual needs and beliefs.The essentials of the uses and gratifications theory have equally been expressed in some other theories like the play theory and selective processes. The play theory "suggests that we use the media as a means of escaping into a world of "play" not accessible at other times. Put differently, the media is

used for the purpose of satisfying the gratifications of entertainment or "escape". On the other hand, the selective processes postulate that the individual, in relating with the media, is selective in terms of what to consume (selective attention), in terms of what to retain (selective retention) and in terms of how to interpret (selective perception).

All this merely attempts to establish one fact; that the audience of the mass media is, rather than passive, active; that it does not follow the media sheepishly, but consciously seeks to utilise it in furthering certain personal needs. The bottom line, therefore, is that what the media gatekeepers give the audience may not necessarily be what it may want to consume and that the effect they may intend may not be the effect it would ultimately have on the audience. In other words, it emphasises what the audience does with the media and not what the media do to the audience.Applied to the subject of this paper, uses and gratifications theory helps to conceptualise the audience of the new media (i.e. their media use culture) as an active factor in determining the extent the new media propels civic engagement. Stated differently, the mere introduction of the new media technologies would not be enough to ensure positive attitude to civic engagement among the youths in Nigeria; the use attitudes (or dispositions) of these young people towards the new media is a fundamental variable in their responding positively to the civic engagement potentials of the new media.

The New Media and Civic Engagement
The media, being the most powerful means of communication in the modern world, have been noted to be of essential benefit to democracy and all its elements, including civic engagement (Nnoli, 1993, p.56; Emekwue, 2003). The new media, given its participatory nature, becomes even more relevant in this respect. The role of the new media in civic engagement could be viewed within the overall framework of what has come to be known as "e-democracy". The online encyclopaedia, *Wikipedia*(2014)on e-democracy comments that E-democracy (a combination of the words *electronic* and *democracy*) is using 21st century information and communications technology to promote democracy. That means a form of government in which all adult citizens are presumed to be eligible to participate equally in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. E-democracy encompasses social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political self-determination.

More precisely, the use of new media in advancing civic engagement could be understood within the broader concept of "Internet democracy." It is commonly defined as "using the Internet, and other Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), to further democratic ideals and forms of governance through "the Internet's information flow, augmented by ever

increasing rainfalls of data, constantly alter[ing] people's knowledge of public affairs and more broadly the political relations of citizens within and between societies" (Margolis & Moreno-Riano, 2009).The role of the new media in civic engagement is realised through a number of processes as discussed below.

Acquiring Relevant Information for Informed Civic Actions

The new media assists civic engagement through equipping the citizens with relevant information for efficient political participation. According to Margolis & Moreno-Riano, (2009), the first step taken by the new media in propelling civic engagement "is the empowerment of individuals. People who have an interest in current political issues and the capacity to learn about them now have access to the information they need to be equipped to make an impact on public policy."This position is re-echoed by Faber 2011 when he observes that the "information capacity available on the Internet allows citizens to become more knowledgeable about government and political issues." The posting "of contact information, legislation, agendas, and policies makes government more transparent, potentially enabling more informed participation both online and offline" (Engelman, 2013).

Citing a research by Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning,Faber (2011) contends that youths who pursue their interests on the Internet are more likely to be engaged in civic and political issues, according to a new study of student Internet usage by a group of civic learning scholars. Youths who use the Internet are also more likely to be exposed to diverse political viewpoints, the study shows.An important dimension to this role of the new media in the civic engagement process is the uniqueness of the information capabilities of the new media. It is a very rich and dynamic information space with peculiar advantages. Silverstone (1999) writes, what is new about new media is precisely the creation of this new and more complex relation toknowledge (regarded as being in continuity with the aspirations of modernity, however, and not as a postmodern relation). He describes the emergence of a new 'knowledge space' that is in starkcontrast to an older knowledge space that was characterized by its linearity, hierarchy and rigidity of structure. This new space – the space of the World Wide Web – is distinguished by its open, fluid and dynamic qualities: it is a space of creative profusion and disorder. The key metaphor is that ofan 'information deluge', creating an 'ocean of information', a 'global ocean of fluctuating signs' (pp. 190–1).

The old – and now superseded – space was one in which vested interests sought, and could achieve, control over the ordered totality of knowledge. In the new condition of disorder, or'knowledge-flux', there can

no longer be any such totalizing perspective or centralized mastery over the global domain of knowledge – it is in this respect that the relation to knowledge is necessarily and inevitably transformed.The bottom line is that the society's civic engagement objectives would be efficiently served by the limitless opportunity for gaining information as offered by the new media. Such information is essential to the citizen's ability to join public discussions and debate.

Participating in Political Discussions/Debates In an Atmosphere of Enhanced Freedom of Speech

Another way through which the new media could aid civic engagement is through providing a platform for political discussions/debates in an atmosphere of enhanced freedom of speech. Concurring with this sentiment, former US Secretariat of State, Hillary Clinton (quoted in Wikipedia, 2014) on Internet Democracy elaborates on what she termed "the freedom to connect":The freedom to connect – the idea that governments should not prevent people from connecting to the Internet, to websites, or to each other. The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly, only in cyberspace. It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate. Once you're on the Internet, you don't need to be a tycoon or a rock star to have a huge impact on society.

Still on the immense capacity of the new media to drive civic engagement through aiding discussions and debates, *Wikipedia* (2014) writes:Internet also plays a central role in deliberative democracy, where deliberation and access to multiple viewpoints is central in decision-making. Internet is able to provide an opportunity for interaction, and serves as a prerequisite in the deliberative process as a research tool. On the Internet the exchange of ideas is widely encouraged through a vast number of websites, blogs, and social networking outlets, such as Twitter; all of which encourage freedom of expression. Through the Internet information is easily accessible, and in a cost effective manner, providing access and means for change. Another fundamental feature of the Internet is its uncontrolled nature, and ability to provide all viewpoints no matter the accuracy. The freedom the Internet provides is able to foster and advocate change, crucial in E-Democracy.

The crux of the matter is that the process of civic engagement inevitably involves political discussions and debates and that the new media has the capacity to serve as the platform for such discussions and debates. This way, the cause of civic engagement is served through this technology.

Direct Conversations with Elected Representatives

The new media would help civic engagement by serving as platform on which the citizens could have direct conversations with their elected representatives. An aspect of the new media that typically becomes relevant here is social media. According to Engelman (2013), social media "is enabling people to play a more active and immediate role in local issues, allowing communities to identify needs and help shape solutions." Similarly, *Wikipedia* (2014) states that "the interactivity of the medium allows for new forms of communication with government, i.e. elected officials and/or public servants." In their study, Otterbacher, Shapiro & Hemphill (2010) discovered that "Twitter provides the infrastructure to facilitate a high level of interactivity between political officials and constituents." They write further:Twitter is "used by people in nearly every country in the world" and elected officials in manyregions have adopted it as a part of their communication strategy. One way that Twitter mightpositively impact political communication is by promotingvertical communicationbetween officialsand the citizens they represent. For instance, according to the website of the European Parliament(EP), social media is "revolutionizing" the way that MEPs communicate with citizens.

No doubt, direct engagement with elected representatives would represent a great breakthrough on the path of civic engagement. This, the new media presents an ample opportunity for.

Pushing for Policy Change

A very vital aspect of civic engagement is the process whereby the citizens push or lobby for policy change. Indeed, influencing the policies of the government is the ultimate goal of civic engagement. Engelman (2013) recalls the radical political transformations credited to the new media in the Arab world in recent years:When we think about the transformations happening in government, social media and the big and open data movements are driving trends. The Arab Spring is probably the most recent example when talking about social media and its ability to impact governments and shape political discourse. During that tumultuous time, social platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube were used to organize protests, share images and information, form communities and engage entire populations in the name of democracy. On top of the power these social networks have to mobilize us, the speed at which ideas and information travel has accelerated. In the world of the 24/7 news cycle, messages spread at lightning speed, and we now expect a rapid response. Increasingly, if we see missteps from our elected officials, few of us are willing to wait four years to express our democratic rights. Almost everyone has the tools to make their voices heard immediately.

Still with reference to the Arab Spring, *Wikipedia* (2014) offers a more elaborate picture of how the new media could be in the service of realising policy change as the ultimate end of civic engagement:Recent events, such as the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, show us how this idea of e-democracy has effectively been used in the political arena. Beginning on January 25 of 2011, mass protests, marches, and rallies flooded the streets of Cairo, Egypt by the thousands. Citizens were protesting the long reign of their President, Hosni Mubarak, as well as the high unemployment rate, government corruption, poverty, and oppression within society. This 18-day revolution did not begin with guns, violence, or protests, but rather with the creation of a single Facebook page which quickly gained the attention of thousands, and soon millions, of Egyptians, spreading into a global phenomenon. The Internet empowered protesters and allowed for anyone with access to the Internet to be involved in the democratization process of their government. In order to have a democratic, free nation, all information that can be shared, should be shared. Protestors communicated, organized, and collaborated through the use of this technology with real time, real impacts. It would be hard to discount the enormous role these technologies played on the world stage during this time. Even when the regime eliminated all access to the Internet in a failed attempt to halt further political online forums, Google and Twitter teamed up, making a system that would get information out to the public without having access to the Internet. The interactivity of media during this revolution boosted civic participation and played a monumental role in the political outcome of the revolution and the democratization of an entire nation.

In Nigeria, the increasing role of the social media platforms in recent elections may represent a growing culture wherein the new media would become an important platform through which the citizens could influence who becomes their leaders and the policies they adopt.

Enabling Group Mobilisation

Apart from giving the individual citizen the opportunity to participate in the governance of his/her country, the new media possesses the capacity to serve as a platform for galvanising group interests within a given socio-political setting. Citizens are more empowered for civic engagement when they operate in groups which give them greater bargaining power than when they act individually (Sassen, 2013). Such groups could be political parties, pressure groups, advocacy groups, professional bodies, etc. In fact, the larger and/or more articulate such a group is, the better placed it could become to empower the citizens for effective civic engagement.

Obviously, the new media offers a veritable platform for such groups to exist and organise their activities. *Wikipedia* (2014) comments on this as

follows: The second way the Internet impacts government is that the Internet empowers groups of people. Social media sites support networks of people; online networks are currently significantly affecting the political process. Pressures from these networks are causing an increase in politicians' efforts to appeal to the public in campaigns. The combination of face-to-face relationships and social networking is a potentially powerful force for the future of politics and e-democracy.Therefore, as far as civic engagement is concerned, the citizens stand to benefit from the new media not just as individuals, but as civic groups.

The New Media And Challenges of Promoting Civic Engagement Among The Nigerian Youths

The power of the new media vis-a-vis civic engagement is not absolute. Hence, Sassen (2013) views as wrong the "strong and generally unchallenged view" which exists in popular consciousness," to the effect "that the Internet is the new electronic cradle of democracy." The true position, nevertheless, is that while the new media's ability to serve the cause of civic engagement has not been in doubt, this power of the new media, just as obtains with the traditional media, does not subsist in a vacuum; its effectiveness is still dependent on certain conditions around the individual and the society. In other words, for the new media to successfully bring about positive attitude towards civic engagement among the youths in Nigeria, it still has to contend with certain variables – psychological and sociological in nature – existing around these youths.

Generally, technologies are passive; they are never conscious enhancers of social values. To achieve any form of social values through technology, the society relies chiefly on the consciousness, character and dispositions of humans who put the technology to operation. In this vein, Wikipedia (2014) onInternet Democracy contends:Information and communications technologies are neither democratic nor undemocratic; they are merely means to an end and not normative by their nature. They are tools that may be deployed to achieve certain goals. And these goals may even be contradictory (e.g. both coercive control and participation can be fostered by digital technology).

Therefore, towards stimulating civic engagement through the new media, certain factors have to be put into consideration; certain variables must be taken note of and accordingly dealt with. These conditions are highlighted in the sub-headings below.

Do Nigerian Youths Have Interest in Politics?

The first question to ask in a situation where the new media is expected to act as a catalyst for civic engagement among Nigerian youths is:

do these young people have interest in political matters? Such interest is a *sinequanon* for their being disposed to avail themselves of the potential advantages of the new media as an enhancer of democratic participation. Concurring with this argument, Sessen (2013) argues, with reference to social media, that the power of the new media in civic engagement manifests better when people are already "civic-minded", as new media does not just compel uninterested minds to key into civic engagement: He elaborates:Someone who is just using social media but unengaged with their local community is not going to be politically active locally. It's not going to turn people who were previously unengaged into civic actors, but it is a good bridge to help them find other connections with people in their town who want to be politically active. It still has to be spurred on by information and engagement in local community. That's really the critical difference. Social media takes people who are already civic minded and gives them avenues for participation but it's not turning a generation into civically minded people. People use traditional media like newspapers and television to gather information about local issues, while social media gives them another means on which to act on that information. Information seekers might be connected enough in their real-world community, so they do not need the online connection. Yet, users seeking connectivity are in search of resources that let them become engaged. In essence, social media and traditional media combine to create better and more powerful tools for people to become engaged, but social media isn't creating good civic citizens among people who weren't yet involved.

Engelman (2013), in this respect, contends that success of civic engagement, whether done through the media or not, often relies upon the extent the citizens are able "to take their own initiative to influence decisions that will affect them." This is where the uses and gratifications theory may come in to explain why the new media would rely on the use habits and depositions of the youths to be able to function effectively in assisting civic engagement among them. In other words, for there to be efficient civil engagement through the new media, the users must have taken the new media as a channel through which they could satisfy their need to get political information and participate in discussions and debates.

Is the Nigerian Political System Supportive of Civic Engagement?

In considering how much the new media could serve the cause of civic engagement in Nigeria, it is also very essential to ask the question: is the Nigerian political system supportive of civic engagement? While Nigeria has become a democracy (a condition crucial for successful civic engagement), it is still admitted that attainment of democratic status does not necessarily fulfil all the conditions required to pull the citizens towards civic

engagement. And once the system is not fully supportive of civic engagement, there is little that the new media could do in this direction.Otterbacher et al. (2010), in this regard, contends that online "civic participation in local democracies depends on the opportunities provided by the government. For e-democracy to prove effective, the democracy first must provide or facilitate the forum for public discussion." This role is not reserved only for the government, other relevant organisations and institutions have a part to play in ensuring that all necessary elements that would facilitate online civic engagement, including the required information and data, are provided and made accessible to the citizenry.

As argued by Faber (2011): In order to ensure that issues are debated in a democratic, inclusive, tolerant and productive way, the role that intermediaries and representative organisations may play should be considered. Electronic provision of official information that is electronically stored. In order to strengthen the effectiveness of the existing legal rights of access to information held by public authorities, citizens should have the right.

In view of the foregoing, the question remains: how much can the Nigerian political system be said to be supportive of civic engagement? To the extent this question could be answered in the positive the new media could be seen as being able to drive the process.

Is the Nigerian Government Responsive Enough to Civic Engagement?

Another key variable in the capacity of the new media to assist civic engagement among youths in Nigeria is the extent the government is responsive to civic engagement. Being responsive to civic engagement implies that the government is not only tolerant to popular participation in the governing process but actively willing to support the process. The government needs to be receptive to criticisms of its policies during the discussions and debates that form part of civic engagement; it needs to address the concern of its citizens through changes in these policies; and it needs to actively facilitate civic engagement among them – all this with the aim of deepening democratic culture. In the absence of all this, civic engagement becomes difficult to sustain even with the new media.

While commenting on this role of government in realising new media-driven civic engagement, Faber (2011) argues:In order to attract people to get involved in online consultations and discussions, government must respond to people and actively demonstrate that there is a relationship between the citizen's engagement and policy outcome. It is also important that people are able to become involved in the process, at a time and place that is convenient to them but when their opinions will count. Government

will need to ensure that the structures are in place to deal with increased participation.

With reference to Austria, China and the United States, Faber (2011) shows how the attitude of the government and the ruling class could affect online civic engagement and e-democracy in general:In a nation with heavy government censorship, e-democracy could not be utilized to its full extent. Austria has the components of an advanced Internet system not unlike China's, but they do not have the political and social norms calling for citizens' opinions to be heard. In a study conducted that interviewed elected officials in Austria's parliament, opinions were widely and strongly against e-democracy. They believed that the citizens were "uninformed" and that their only way of expressing their opinions should be to vote; sharing opinions and ideas was strictly the job of the elected. Austria's officials have a contrasting idea of their roles than those in the US, where the citizens' opinions are respected and called for, and their power is up to the citizens. Citizens' opinions in the U.S. do not take away from politicians' influence. In Austria, on the other hand, the elected officials have no tolerance for their powers to be diminished in the slightest, including by allowing citizens to openly express ideas and opinions about politics, because it makes the people in power vulnerable to the citizens. Austria's blatant negative opinion on e-democracy shows that it is necessary for a nation to have openness in political thought from citizens for e-democracy to thrive.

Sessen (2013) in this vein argues that "the majority of governments have a long way to go to actively engage their citizens to participate in e-democracy." And the sooner the Nigerian government toes this line the better hope for realising more robust and more dynamic civic engagement among the Nigerian youths via the new media.

Conclusion

The role which the new media could play in catalysing civic engagement among youths in Nigeria is not in doubt given the social media's immense capacity to serve as a platform for social interaction, enlightenment and mobilisation. This paper has noted that the new media, through its multiple platforms could serve the cause of civic engagement by, among others, serving as a medium for gaining of civic education, participation in civic discussions and debates, engaging in direct exchange with elected representatives, pushing for policy change and organisation and mobilisation of groups for civic actions.However, the paper argues further that the new media would not be able to play all these roles in a vacuum. It contended that certain variables of sociological and psychological nature would, to far reaching extents, influence the manner and the extent the new media would be able to drive the youths towards civic engagement. Among these variables

are the extent of the youths show interest in politics, the supportive nature of the political environment and how much receptive the government is to civic engagement.

In conclusion, therefore, it is stated that the new media, as a communication technology that has great penetrating power, is naturally suited to the needs of civic engagement. However, this technology, to be successful in this role, must negotiate with certain intervening variables that exist within the political system and within the individuals that make up the system. This is becausetechnology is and has been a blessing, "but before we go to that well too often, we also need to realize that it is not the answer to every problem" (Trembly, 2009). This underscores the inevitable role of the human facilitators who must, via conscious and well strategized efforts, work towards realising these potentials of the new media vis-a-vis civic engagement among the Nigerian youths.

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