

Impact of Digital Media on Political Campaigns

Towards Disintermediated Political Communication in Africa

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Abstract

This article explores the impact of digital media on political campaigns towards disintermediated political communication in Africa. It highlights that, due to the proliferation of digital media, political communication processes have drastically shifted away from traditional formats to more adaptable and personalised platforms linked to digital citizenship. It further discusses the characterisation of African political campaigns and their impact on democratisation. Application of the Adaptive structuration and Media richness theories is employed to explicate the role of information technologies in facilitating societal change. The article argues that disintermediation in political campaigns results from unfettered access to alternative means of information with the potential to diminish the power of the “voice”; stimulate new forms of political consciousness; cultivate optimisation of political engagement and yield truism through verification of political information both pre and post-elections. It concludes that digital media have radically changed how the electorate participates in African politics, meanwhile cascading its ability to empower citizens to redefine their sense of political space in a disintermediated environment.

Keywords: Digital media, political campaigns, disintermediation, politics, Africa

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36615/ajpsrasp.v10i1.1152>

Introduction

The concept of digital media is a 21st-century phrase used to define all forms of digital communication related to the internet as it describes the interplay between technology, text, images, and sound in the context of information production and consumption (Lindgren, 2017). It is associated with the information revolution where new (digital) media have given impetus to the evolving multi-media environment leading to numerous changes in the way society interacts. Internet-based publishing and citizen journalism, largely made possible by the proliferation of digital (social) media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have permeated all facets of life including politics (Karekwaivanane & Msonza, 2021). This interplay has yielded a plethora of widely distributed digital products and a growing share of user-generated content attributable to members of the public, irrespective of geographic space or professional skill (Rodny-Gumede, 2017). Apparently, the new trend has yielded new ways of information dissemination and consumption among all age groups, and this includes the sphere of political communication. This is particularly interesting, especially since research on the use of new media applications has revealed that a significant number of people already spend more time on digital platforms each week than on any other media platform (Lindgren, 2017). As such, people all over the world are now largely exposed to numerous digitally-inclined interactive technologies that come with ample opportunities to participate in the political space as planetary citizens.

Subsequently, as digital media technologies continue to become an integral part of people's daily lives, political communicators also get compelled to adapt to the drastic changes associated with the technological revolution and politics. Orature or rhetoric, which dominated the world of African politics for centuries, now occurs in a multi-media environment dominated by digital technologies with virtual reality sites (Ott, 2017). This has dramatically altered the way in which politicians relate to potential voters and constituencies in the political space, particularly in Africa where the realities of the digital divide remain starkly evident (Pick & Sarkar, 2015). Contrary to the traditional context when politicians depended on the power of their oral persuasive skills for political expediency to convince the electorate during elections, today's politicking occurs in a media flux. Some decades ago, the success of political campaigns in many parts of the world including Africa lay in the astute application of word-of-mouth rhetoric to influence supporters or lure them (Baines & O' Shaughnessy, 2014). Hence, the effectiveness of electoral campaigns largely relied on propaganda for electioneering supported by the public media, especially public service broadcasting.

As such, media practitioners including journalists and editors would fulfill the agenda-setting role as agents of and mouthpieces of politicians and political parties in their respective countries (Nyarota, 2018). This yielded a scenario where news production teams or journalists with knowledge about the public's behaviour, would become purveyors of public opinion formation, agenda-setting, and evaluation (McNair, 2011; Muswede, 2019). Hence, political punditry was popularised through craftily tailored opinion pieces, columns, satiric cartoons, editorials, and talk show programmes targeted at gullible audiences. Overall, this means that conventional news media have over time forecasted, interpreted, and even prescribed to the public what political content and ideological views they should uphold (Muswede & Lubinga, 2018). To this end, the article explores the impact of digital media on political campaigns towards disintermediation of political communication in Africa.

Characterisation of Political Campaigns in Africa

Emphasis on the "One Party State Model" of government

Fanon (1963) observed that some of the earliest campaigns by political leaders after assuming power have been associated with the dangers of adopting the "one-party state" approach as a system of governance. In the context of "pitfalls of national consciousness", he emphasised the value of multi-party politics as a true reflection of democracy as opposed to the centralised system of governance. In agreement with this view, Koenane and Mangena (2017) noted that in most African states, regardless of how the government is structured, a minority group always holds real power. This is due to the dearth of active citizenship where political campaigns reduce citizens' participation to mere casting ballots during elections without a clear understanding of the subsequent outcomes (Dieltiens, 2005). Studies on the post-colonial governments in Africa have noted how the military often becomes part of an institutional transfer of western paradigms of governance along with models of political administration (Naidoo, 2006). This has been common in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria and recently in Mali where military commanders usurp power to get recognition as legitimate leaders of government. Despite promises to hold elections in due course, this trend has become the agency for political grand-standing and guarantee for self-aggrandisement. This often leads to democratic principles being overrun by the politics of patronage such as was the case in Zimbabwe, where the military over time had taken the 'king maker' role by campaigning and sustaining the ruling party in power (Nyarota, 2018).

Political intolerance and excessive use of force

After assuming state power, most African leaders have resorted to perpetual power through political campaigns that have demonstrated their pre-occupation with incumbency resulting in a suffocated political space. This trajectory unfolds at the expense of strengthening institutions of governance such as electoral and judicial reforms (Zinyama, 2011). In some countries, this has led to contestations that have degenerated to levels of anarchy as exemplified by the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Zairean 1996/7 strife (French, 2004), and recent conflicts playing out in South Sudan, Somalia, and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. This has led to civic outrages in the form of agitated civil protests and violent political altercations during and after elections as was the case in Uganda in 2020. Apparently, these actions have been met with lethal responses through police brutality often leading to disenfranchisement (Nyarota, 2018). In Zimbabwe, the government of then-President Mugabe's response to the untenable socio-economic situation yielded politico-security skirmishes between opposition parties and civil society under similar circumstances. This occurred in the context of a number of restrictive laws including the Public Order and Security Act (POSA, 2001) which made it difficult for a multi-party political environment to prevail until the transition in 2018.

Infringement on freedom of speech, opinion, and human rights

Some scholars have observed that there has been an increasing trend, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa for governments to impose draconian laws that suppress freedom of speech and access to information (Koenane & Mangena, 2017), especially towards elections. In numerous instances, the news media have carried disheartening news where ordinary citizens have been brutalised or denied the right to register their discontent against misrule through peaceful demonstrations (Nyarota, 2018). Instead of the political campaigns being used to entrench human rights and achievement of broader interests of the citizens, civic society has had to pressure politicians to be responsive towards the will of the people. This is contrary to Heywood's (2007) view that political systems should be punctuated by the free and continuous participation of society in the decision-making processes of government. However, most African states do not seize the opportunity to view the media (particularly public service broadcasting) as nation-building platforms. Instead, they have used them as tools of political expediency and propagators of divisive ideological enclaves associated with tribalism and vengeance (Muswede & Lubinga, 2018). Subsequently, the media have largely failed to play the nuanced mediation role in which the citizens need to make informed decisions about electoral processes and the state of political affairs in their respective countries. An example of this kind of intervention was the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA, 2001) in Zimbabwe which the government of the time used to deal with political activists and 'unpatriotic' journalists (Nyarota, 2018).

Digital Media Utilities and Communicative Benefits

This section discusses how digital media allow users to express their opinions, beliefs, share thoughts and participate in interactive conversations with prospects for unique ways of civic political engagement. It attests to the fact that, while digital and traditional media differ extensively, this disjuncture is evident with respect to communications flow and audience penetration (Hutchins & Rowe, 2012), as determinants of the medium's appeal.

The blurring of production and consumption of information

Unlike traditional, digital media engagements have increasingly become amenable to the ordinary person both in terms of production and consumption where most users with no expertise can thrive on their volition and actual construction to optimally function online (Lindgren, 2017).

As such, content production and consumption are not seen as rigidly separated anymore, rather the lines between them are blurred as users can create personal blogs and podcasts, record their daily activities as they wish, and post videos on YouTube. Judging by the popularity and level of buzz these platforms have created among users, it can be argued that the blur between media production and consumption has widely been embraced (Wood, 2012). Subsequently, this has made digital media platforms more popular, particularly among citizens who view them as a way of self-expression to make their opinions count and to share their views with other users or communicators (Lindgren, 2017).

Propensity to alter conceptions of space

Prior to the invention of computers and the internet, space was understood as an abstract and astronomical concept including within political contexts, and the space was viewed as a distinct phenomenon from the people, objects, and events that happened within it (Wood, 2012). However, of late digital media have successfully bridged this space and time among users, thereby enabling them to have instant communication through text chats, voice chats, and video calling et cetera, which defy the geographic distance between correspondents (Chen, Mao, & Qiu, 2018). Beyond overcoming the traditional challenge of geographic distance, digital media have been commended for facilitating instant communication and users' aptitude to alter the conception of space. In political contexts, this would entail the ability to access information or participate in platforms that traditionally would have been impossible to partake in due to physical distance and time constraints.

Low cost and a high degree of user-friendliness

One of the benefits of digital media applications, particularly social media networks is their public availability on web browser-enabled devices such as a smartphone or a personal computer at a relatively low cost (White et al., 2011). Applications such as WhatsApp enable users to interactively communicate at nearly zero cost particularly during promotions, thereby affording users ample time to converse without fear of immediate depletion of airtime or data. Most importantly, nearly all social media platforms rely on highly user-friendly interfaces which require minimal technical skills for optimal use (Elefant & Black, 2012). This is a good gesture for ordinary users who may be semi-literate or relatively illiterate because they do not have to provide requisite educational or professional qualifications to partake in any form of personal or collective interaction with other users.

Enablers of community-based communication

In the context of interactive communication, digital media technologies do enable ordinary persons to construct their own meanings based on their personal experiences, something that allows formation of digital communities. This affords communities the latitude to share matters of common interest, such as political issues or a favourite television programme on the cards (Clow & Baack, 2012). Thus, through digital media technologies, community members can gather virtually and discuss topics of interest, share ideas and express both personal and collective views on matters of common interest. This has the potential to facilitate community colloquia which enables users to meet both professional and lay people to share divergent or similar views via these virtual links (Chen, Mao, & Qiu, 2018). Such connections enable users to explore areas of common interest by meeting content mediators who may contribute towards their personal and collective knowledge of political issues. For example, digital citizens can create a group where they share common or personal experiences which can later be aired on mainstream media platforms where they may end up receiving public attention.

Facilitation of links for connectedness

Most kinds of digital media, especially social media networks thrive on connectedness, making use of links to other sites, resources, and people as multipliers. For most cases, these forms enable users to converse with other participants such as friends, family, parents, and potential clients in a relatively safe and convenient online environment (Lindgren, 2017). For these reasons, most people spend time on social media for different purposes including chatting, updating profiles, getting along with old friends, and meeting new ones during online sessions (Grey & Silver-Pacuilla, 2011). Contrary to traditional forms of media, digital media platforms have a personal rather than public focus, which makes it possible for users to derive personal gratification even in sole transactions (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). It is this ubiquitous nature that sets digital media above traditional forms of media whose packaging processes stem from a heterogeneous and often consultative scope of practice rather than a personal appeal.

Theoretical Proposition on New Media Communication

Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST)

DeSanctis and Poole (1994) promulgated this theory as a modification of Giddens' (1984) Structuration Theory following studies on the role of information technology to enable the understanding of organisational or societal change. The theory proposes that advanced information technologies such as social networking sites do not only facilitate multiparty participation in society but also ensure the exchange of information about activities within organisations through information management. Furthermore, the theory promulgates that a bi-directional exchange between society as a system and technology as a structure often develops in which societies adopt information technologies to enhance human interaction and public communication. Subsequently, it argues that technologies are and represent the medium, but are also the outcome of social actions with societies facilitating the circulation of the information. Through a structuration process, systems and structures exist in a relationship where they produce and reproduce each other. The AST emphasises the importance of how the technologies are used, with the users acting as agenda-setters for the kind of information they receive and how they respond to it (Rains & Bonito, 2017).

The relevance of AST in studying digital media relates to its ability to facilitate an effective analysis of how new information and communication technologies are used in society as well as how they permeate existing functions. For example, an analysis of conversations on Twitter reflects the theory's functional link involving the transfer of information from one group in society to another (Rains & Bonito, 2017). This may be inclusive of interactions among individual politicians or a group of politicians with their existing or potential electorates and between electorates. Notably, these bi-directional interactions usually evolve meanwhile shifting back and forth between the users through the medium, from the system (society) to structure (technology) and vice versa. In the context of the tenets of the Adaptive Structural Theory, as the medium evolves, it impacts society with the inherent potential to inspire change (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). As such, digital (social) media should be seen as social interaction technologies that have virtuously permeated the post-modern world, eventually playing a major role in influencing various fields of society including politics.

Media richness theory

The media richness theory is an ingenious philosophy of organisational communication which makes predictions about behaviour and outcomes in connection with various communication contexts. Even though the theory was developed well before the emergence of the internet and the widespread use of electronic communication technologies available today, the scope of media richness theory's

predictions is relevant to digital media (Kock, 2010). The theory proposes that different media have different degrees of media richness and leanness in their effort to transmit information. Media richness is defined as the capacity of information exchange within a time interval (Zelkowitz, 2010), thus the difference between media richness and leanness is the amount of information a medium could convey to change the receiver's understanding of the message within a time interval. The proposition is premised within the social presence theory as it espouses that the increased richness of the media is linked to the increased social presence of users (Zelkowitz, 2010). For example, when users of social media are both online, communication becomes easy as each individual makes an effort to make sure that the information received by the other user is understood. If not understood, one user is able to ask the other user to rephrase or explain themselves right away. This communication is instant, thereby allowing the participants to respond to one another immediately.

Media richness theory argues that the media differ in their level of richness and this is determined by four criteria, which are natural language, the capacity of the medium to carry multiple cues, degree of personal focus, and the speed of feedback (Cheng, 2008). This infers that the richest medium would have to offer not just one but all four aspects. Subsequently, this would allow users to communicate in any language which they feel comfortable with, and be presented with multiple cues with which to express themselves whenever the need arises. The medium would also allow users to personalise the medium while also affording them the opportunity to discuss personal issues within their comfort zones and enjoy speedy feedback. For these reasons, some scholars have attributed the selection of a particular technology by users to the richness of the medium or the objective characteristics of the medium (Joosten, 2012), an aspect that makes digital media important in communication.

The theory further makes two predictions that argue that, for effective communication to occur, media users often choose the richest possible media available to them. Secondly, when the choice of media is constrained (e.g. only when the medium is available), media users resort to the use of a lean communication platform. Thus, both social presence and media richness theories uphold the view that the perceived sense of the social presence of a medium is proportional to the medium's richness. Hence, rich media with a wide communication capacity also have a high level of social presence (Zelkowitz, 2010). Overall, this basically means that the richer the media platform, the more social presence it will provide to the users who then interact on the basis of its qualities.

Digital Media Political Campaigns: Towards Disintermediated Political Communication in Africa

This section discusses how digital media impacts political campaigns in an environment where media users engage with simple technologies such as smartphones and tablets to access political information during campaigns. For many people, including those in rural Africa, this is possible without the need to acquire special training as would be the case with other professional gadgets or software.

Diminishing the power of voice with digital optics

With the advent and proliferation of digital media technologies, particularly social media networks, the traditional political thought processes involved in political campaigns for leadership in society have been dramatically transformed. The ever-increasing penetration levels of media technology in people's daily lives has yielded a situation where the political sphere is compelled to adapt to the *modus operandi* associated with the digital technological revolution (Dingli & Seychell, 2015), as opposed to the power of the voice. Twitter in particular has enabled a disintermediation process in politics by replacing the power of voice from conventional media to digitally-inclined politics. Where news media and journalists have traditionally been powerful intermediaries in communicating politics and exerting political influence, politicians now use digital platforms such as Twitter to

lure potential voters and engage civic society on political issues. In conjunction with other digital platforms, they use it to directly state their opinions to the electorate, at times using it as a campaign platform, where they covertly attempt to set good examples to their followers through personal tweeting behaviour (Kruikemeier, 2014).

Adaptation and stimulation of political consciousness

Some scholars have noted digital (social) media's perceived instrumental role in projecting negative rhetoric in the political arena (Lee & Quealy, 2018), particularly in developed countries such as the United States of America. They claim that traditional propaganda techniques such as *loaded words* which enabled the use of concepts with strong negative connotations and antics like *name-calling* have been adapted to digital platforms. Specifically, Das Sarma (2016) remarked on how Twitter has augmented propaganda techniques by bolstering their personal nature to facilitate political grandstanding and posturing in contemporary politics.

Despite this notion, this tendency has disintermediated political rhetoric due to digital media's ability to stir political consciousness among the citizenry. This is confirmed by Crockett (2016) who analysed 2,500 tweets posted by former President Donald Trump over a period of 8 months during his campaign for the USA presidency. The study noted that, despite being mostly negative, Trump's use of rhetoric in his Twitter handle gave his campaign an edge over other political rivals in the presidential race (Das Sarma, 2016). Therefore, it can be argued that, while digital media platforms may be adaptable to traditional techniques of political campaigns (White, King, & Tsang, 2011), this happens in a digitally savvy media environment populated by planetary citizens.

Unfettered access to uncensored political information

Digital media technologies, particularly social media networks have changed the way political information is accessed and how potential voters interact with it as opposed to content subjected to strict editorial control and gatekeeping (Kruikemeier, 2014). This is particularly applicable in places where citizens remain highly fragmented and large segments are cut off from the mainstream media (Rodny-Gumede, 2017). In some parts of Africa, poor signal distribution, costly DStv subscriptions and the multiplicity of languages or dialects that compete for airspace have compounded editorial and programme scheduling practices (Pick & Sarkar, 2015). Moreover, it has been difficult to meet the informational needs of the broad scope of audiences in such places due to age group preferences, cultural and linguistic dictates. This situation has left some parts of society feeling marginalised, thereby providing fertile ground for political opportunism and grandstanding when politicians make ambitious promises to desperate communities. In view of these limitations, digital media's easily accessible formats, have become alternative sources of uncensored political information (Hobbs & Roberts, 2018). Subsequently, the electorate can switch sources to suit their informational needs on favourite online news tags and independent political analysts. To a large extent, such growing access to a variety of media platforms offers added opportunities to voters to get alternative political information with which to inform their decision-making processes.

Prospects for truism and information verification

Digital tools provide citizens with platforms for possible information verification as means of counteracting propaganda tactics. As digital media technologies continue to become an integral part of people's daily lives, mainstream media, including public service broadcasting have been compelled to adapt to the drastic changes associated with the limitless opportunities available on these platforms (Hobbs & Roberts, 2018). With their inherent ability to facilitate multi-path, multi-directional dialogue between individuals (person to person/person to group), influencers, and

companies (Powell et al., 2011), digital media have changed the conceptualisation of information as a homogeneous exercise with similar tastes and needs (Rodny-Gumede, 2017). This has deconstructed the passive and gullible consumption of political information as the *gospel truth* which could not be questioned, particularly from the popular liberators. Before the proliferation of digital media, political rhetoric was largely churned out through state broadcasting entities (Muswede & Lubinga, 2018). Conversely, the digital platforms have empowered citizens with tools of information verification, thereby broking the erstwhile state-interventionist tendencies associated with state broadcasters' cajoling as purveyors of truth. This helps to curb the hegemonic control of state broadcasters which often succumb to ideological pressure (Mendel, 2011), a situation that often leads to the hypnotisation of the vulnerable populace into political oblivion. Thus, the social presence of digital media broadens the political space towards the promotion of pluralistic ideas that empower citizens to make informed choices about who should lead them.

Optimisation of citizen participation and political engagement

Both the adaptive structuration and social presence theories discussed above do infer that, due to their interactivity features, digital media platforms have the ability to influence and enhance active citizen participation. In the recent past, they have been used to promote civic activism, voter education, and mobilisation based on their user-benefit features which encourage open dialogue (Karekwaivanane & Msonza, 2021). Their interactive nature has transformed media users from being mere consumers of content to active participants with the ability to co-produce content in the form of citizen journalism (Saridou et al., 2018). For this reason, they have become the foremost tools for dissemination of breaking news accounts, with the possibility to stimulate political dialogue into new perspectives. As a platform for citizen engagement, they are not time-bound (Sang-Hee, Kyung-Ho, & Do-Hyun, 2011), a feature that enables users to write or post anything information they wish to 'trend' or popularise. In the context of political engagement, this speaks to daily interactions based on self-expression and sharing of information on platforms from which they can get immediate feedback from other activists, politicians, or potential voters. This is enhanced through the multiple apps and feedback regimes that operate without diminishing the number of users partaking in the conversation. This is dissimilar to mainstream media where preferred guests usually dominate the content and only a handful of participants get an opportunity to contribute to the political debate.

Conclusion

This article notes that, in today's digital media landscape, information dissemination and consumption patterns have drastically shifted away from traditional formats to more adaptable and personalised platforms linked to digital power or mobile culture (Lindgren, 2017), as gateways to digitally inclined politics. As a result, access to political information, participation, and opinion formulation operate in a radically transformed political context wherein the electorate has become elusive participants in the electoral process. As such, the erstwhile tendency of intermediated political campaigns that thrived on propaganda, orature, and state censorship, to serve the interest of the elite has been extensively disintermediated by digitalisation. This is because contemporary politics now occurs in the buoyancy of unfettered access to alternative political information with the potential to diminish the power of the "voice"; stimulating new forms of political consciousness; cultivating optimisation of political engagement and yielding prospects for truism through verification of political information both pre and post-elections. In the end, the article concludes that digital media have radically changed how the electorate participates in African politics, meanwhile cascading its ability to empower citizens to redefine their sense of political space in a disintermediated environment.

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