
Politexting: Using Mobile Technology to Connect the Unconnected and Expanding the Scope of Political Communication

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Abstract

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has changed the face of the world, and its impact is manifest in every facet of our lives. The introduction of ICT into the democratic process, and the use of the new technologies by politicians and public officials is no exception; access to information is crucial to effective citizen participation in the democratic process. The shift in the technological innovations offers the political class, those seeking public office and elected representatives considerable scope to improve their communication strategy, and information management. Furthermore, the potential to improve communication and information flow between public officials and citizens has greatly increased. This study utilizes interpretive approach to examine the communicative experiences of elected representatives in Nigeria. The study revealed that mobile technologies have become ubiquitous and potent political communication tool by elected representatives in Nigeria with focus on the use of text messaging, a phenomenon described in this study as Politexting also known as short messaging system (SMS) – the use of text messaging in political communication. The purpose of the study was to investigate the use of information and communication technology tools by Nigerian legislators to communicate with their constituents.

Key words: Politexting, Information and Communication Technology, Political Communication

1. INTRODUCTION

In any democratic society, being informed, combined with the capacity of citizens to participate freely in the political process are both necessities and rights (Mulder, 1999). Kakadadse, Kakadadse, & Kouzmin, (2003) argued that democratic potential is the capacity of citizens to participate effectively and knowledgeably in socially constitutive processes. Democracy and good governance require citizen's participation. Similarly, access to information is vital for transparency, accountability and inclusiveness, yet the voices of the poor, women and minorities often times go unheard, especially in developing democracies. The shift in the technological innovations offer elected representatives, and

the political class considerable scope to improve communication and information management between them and the people (Williamson, 2009).

Regular dialogues and feedback keep citizens and elected officials in close contacts. The value of such engagements combined with new technologies have the capacity to enlarge the scope of political dialogue, and serve as educational process that brings issues into the public focus and allows them to be defined (Kakabadse, Kakadadse & Kouzmin 2003). Coleman, Taylor & Van De Donk (1999) submitted that the stronger, and clearer the flows of information between citizens and their representatives, the better is the health of democratic system. In this new information age,

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) were one of the elements heralded as capable of assisting elected representatives and public officials in reconnecting with the public (Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, 2006). Based on its transformative power in business and other sectors, it is therefore important to investigate how ICTs are being used by elected representatives in performing their legislative functions.

ICT tools have been credited with empowering people to take active role in political decision making process including open debates that are essential to sustain democracy and pluralist society. The purpose of this study is to investigate the most commonly used information and communication tool used by the elected representatives in Nigeria to communicate with their constituents. This is an exploratory study, and I used interpretive approach to investigate the phenomenon.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The overarching goal of this study was to investigate the impact of new information and communication technology (ICT), especially the ICT tools used by Members of the House of Representatives in Nigeria to communicate with their constituents. In order to understand this phenomenon, I framed my main research question as:

What are the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools available to Members of the House of Representatives (HR) in Nigeria to communicate with their constituents?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of technology in political communication has stimulated interesting discussions among scholars in response to alleged crisis of representation due to public disenchantment towards democratic institutions and practices. Representative institutions varied because of political culture, tradition, and history. This makes it difficult to assess the broad-spectrum effects of technological advancement on political institutions. In addition, the adoption and application of technologies differ from one political culture to another. While others perceived new technologies as disruptive to traditional practices; some viewed it as a means to enhance productivity, efficiency and accountability.

Coleman and Spiller (2003) in their study of British Parliament, *Exploring New Media Effects on Representative Democracy*, observed that representative bodies have come under increasing pressure to either connect more directly with citizens or risk becoming marginalized. Lusoli, Ward, and Gibson (2006) reported that it has increasingly become commonplace to talk of crisis in parliamentary representation in the United Kingdom as a result of an increasing gulf between the Parliament, its members, and the British public. "Citizens know less about MPs and the Parliament than was the case in the past. Only 42% of the public can correctly name their MP, a 10% decrease from early 1990s" (Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, 2005, p. 26).

Similarly, The Hansard Society, a leading independent, non-partisan political research and education charity based in the United Kingdom in its briefing at the House of Lords in December 2008, on *Enhancing Parliament's Ability to Communicate with Members of the Public* highlighted the increasing gap between the British Members of Parliament (MPs), and the public. The Hansard Society reported that just 32% of the people agree that they have a good understanding of the way Parliament works and only 19% of the people surveyed agree that Parliament is working for them. These statistics show increasing citizens' disengagement or lack of trust for the Parliament and/or the parliamentarians.

Many studies ((Coleman, Taylor, & Van De Donk, 1999; Leston-Bandeira, 2007; Lyons & Lyons, 1999; Mulder, 1999; and Williamson, 2009) recognized that digital technologies may provide a way of making representatives more accessible to the public. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has had an important and growing impact on the work of elected representatives. In a study on *Communicating with Congress*, Fitch & Goldschmidt (2005) concluded that members of Congress have more opportunity to interact easily with many people as a result of the new technologies.

The study reported that e-mail, the Internet, databases, and other new technologies make it faster, easier, and less expensive for members of Congress to develop interactive relationships with their constituents. The study further indicated that the new technologies provided grassroots organizations and citizens with new

opportunities to organize concerning issues, ability to access and share information, and communicate with elected officials. The report indicated that the Congressional staff acknowledged the importance of the new technologies in enhancing communication between elected representatives and the electorate.

Hysom (2008) noted that with the advent of the new technologies, the public has the capability to be almost as informed as Members and staff about topical issues in the Congress. "Now, it is not only the Member educating and updating the constituent, but the constituent is bringing new information to the Member as well" (p. 39). In addition, Goldschmidt and Ochreiter (2008) reported that the Internet has had significant impact on the political realm in the United States, where a new group of politically-engaged, online citizens has found its preferred method for civic participation. E-mail, blogs, online news content, and social networking sites have made it easier for those online to get information, to get organized, to contact public officials, and to make a difference.

Transformative Impact of IT in Representative Democracy

In their study of how the Scottish Parliament has been transformed with the adoption of the new technology, Smith & Gray (1999) stated that the Scottish Parliament represents an unparalleled democratic innovation in governance with the adoption, and incorporation of Information and Communication Technology into its legislative business. They argued that Scottish Parliament represents an opportunity for democratic renewal which cannot be underestimated, and the role of technology in supporting the renewal was well articulated and implemented. Information Communication and Technology (ICTs) were credited with transformative potentials that not only support the operations of the parliament in terms of representative democracy, but it also shifts the nexus of political engagement away from pure representative democracy towards actual participative engagement in the political process.

Lusoli, Ward, & Gibson, (2006), identified Information Communication Technology (ICTs) as one of the elements capable of assisting the parliament in reconnecting with the public. In a study of United Kingdom (UK) Parliamentarians and the use of the Internet to reconnect with the

public, it was discovered that the desire of the UK Members of Parliament, and the House of Commons (HoC) to connect with the public via electronic means is palpable. The study found that among the growing range of channels available to citizens to contact their elected representatives, telephone is reportedly the medium of choice. Lusoli et al concluded that new technologies have potentials to attract new citizens and deepen people's engagement with the parliament

Mobile technology, (especially text messaging) is another new ICT tool credited with changing the political communication's landscape. According to a Pew Research Center study (2010), cell phones have become an essential communication tool for American adults. The Pew study stated that 82% of American adults say they have cell phones, and 71% of them use text messaging, and 26% of Americans used their cell phones to connect to the 2010 mid-term elections. In 2008 American elections, President Obama pioneered the use of text messages in political communication by using the text message to announce his running mate, and to mobilize people to register and vote on the Election Day, especially targeting the youth and adults. Dale and Strauss, (2007) in their study on text messaging as a youth mobilization tool conducted during November 2006 elections, found out that text messaging is a powerful tool to reach new voters and drive them to the polls. The result of the study indicated that text message reminders to new voters increased an individual's likelihood of voting by 3.2%, a strong margin that could change a close election.

Graff (2008) stated that text messaging has become the tool of expression for those dissatisfied with the political status quo around the world. For instance, in 2001, protesters organized themselves through text messages to overthrow President Joseph Estrada of Philippines. Graff (2008) also indicated that text messages helped toppled Jose Maria Aznar's government in Spain, after the Madrid train bombings in 2004. Similarly, Celdran (2002) argued that text messaging has altered the traditional rules of political communication and mobilization with far-reaching implications for the nature of citizenship in an age characterized by rapid innovations in information technology. Celdran (2002) further explained that the most impressive characteristics of text messaging are network connectivity, speed, cost-effectiveness,

mobility and confidentiality. He submitted that when these same characteristics are in tandem with external social forces, text messaging becomes a potential tool for mediating political information and accelerating the process of political change as witnessed in Philippines.

The use of new technology as potent political communication, and mobilization tool was demonstrated in the Arab Spring that engulfs North Africa and Middle East since the beginning of 2011. In this case, a combination of social media including the mobile technology has increasingly empowered the people to be connected together. This connectivity enables the citizens to create communities engaged on single issue, and bounded together by a common goal, which has caused unparallel political revolution that has consumed forces of undemocratic political hegemony in the Middle East. But despite the transformative impact of ICTs, there are still concerns over lack of access, affordability and digital divide between those who are connected and those who are not.

3. DATA AND RESEARCH METHODS

Methodologically, this study focused primarily on the Nigerian National Assembly, with critical review of the use of information and communication technology (ICT) tools by the United States Congress and the British Parliament. A qualitative research methodology was used in this study and two methods of in-depth interviews and direct observations were utilized to investigate the phenomenon. In this study, I conducted 31 face to face, in-depth interviews with the representatives and staff of the House of Representatives in Nigeria. The interviews followed the protocol developed to ensure consistency in the interview process. The interview protocol consisted of six open ended questions that were asked to explore the communicative experiences of the representatives. In addition, direct observation was carried out for one month. During this period, I observed several interactions between the representatives and their staff and the communication process that took place among them.

Each representative was interviewed once, and a separate interview was conducted with the Representative's Senior Legislative Aide in order to get the staff's perspectives on the phenomenon being studied. In addition, I attended various Committee meetings, sub-

committee meetings (as an observer), and the House plenary sessions as part of the direct observation process. The dynamics of these interactions and communication artifacts were observed and documented in my field notes. Information recorded in my field notes during the direct observation enriched my data collection and thick interpretation of the phenomenon. All the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I then adopted the process of thematization to organize participants' experiences into common themes and recurring features as captured in the in-depth interviews.

Data Analysis

Denzin's (2001) six steps interpretive approach was used to structure the data collection and data analysis of this phenomenon. An interpretive approach is a qualitative research method that "refers to the process of explaining the meaning of something" (Crawley, 1999, p.42). Denzin (2001) explains further that the focus of interpretive approach is on those life experiences that dramatically or radically alter and shape the meanings persons give to themselves and their experiences. The interpretive approach allows the researcher to be located in the social situation and interact with the participants with a view to "develop interpretations and personal stories grounded in the worlds of lived experience" (p. 42). The six steps or phases in the interpretive process outlines by Denzin are: framing the research question, deconstructing, capturing, bracketing, constructing, and contextualizing.

In Denzin's six-step interpretive process, framing the research question, deconstruction and capturing the phenomenon deal with data collection while bracketing, construction and contextualization of the phenomenon deal with the data analysis process. The process of thick interpretation I used in this study offers key insights, deep meanings and understanding into the use of, and the impact of new technologies in the communication process between elected representatives and their constituents in Nigeria. A plethora of communication tools used by elected representatives, and other salient themes essential to participants' communicative experiences were identified and highlighted through the thematization process. This resulted in ten initial themes (these include traditional communication tools and technological oriented communication tools), which were further

scrutinized for similarity and interconnectivity. The theme reduction process resulted in the emergence of three core ICTs tools used by the Nigerian legislators to communicate with their constituents, namely: E-mail, cell phone and text messaging.

4. EXPANDING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH POLITEXTING

Overwhelming majority of the participants in this study identified mobile phone as the ubiquitous Information and Communication Technology tool used by elected representatives in Nigeria to communicate with their constituents. The rapid transformation of Nigeria's telecommunications landscape coincided with the country's transition to democracy in 1999 when the government licensed three Global System of Mobile Communications (GSM) networks in 2001 to provide mobile phone services in the country. Since then, the growth in the telecommunication industry in Nigeria has been exponential. As pointed out by one of the participants:

With the advent of the cell phones, and the ever increasing expansion of different networks that are all over the country, we are able to communicate with our constituents and they are able to get in touch with us. They either speak directly with us or send us text messages. Virtually in every nook and crannies of the constituency, we have access to the people through the cell phone.

One significant finding of this study was that the mobile communication was easily accessible to the people irrespective of their location, age, gender and status. One participant observed that:

Cell phone cut across the elderly, the middle age, everybody has a cell phone in Nigeria. The unemployed have a cell phone...it is beautiful in Nigeria because you can go under a mango tree, there's always somebody with a cell phone...you can quickly make a call.... I do say that the cell phone has revolutionalized communication in Nigeria and it has helped the lawmakers to reach out to their people, to be there for them.

Though the above account was significant and it was corroborated by other participants, a particular experience shared by one of the

participants revealed that text messaging has becomes the nucleus of the communicative experiences of Nigerian legislators:

What I have also noticed is that with this cell phone, it reduced the number of letters coming from the constituency, people just call. When you tell them oh! You know what; you could've written it down, they would rather text you the information. If there is a problem that they need help on, or they are looking for information at the Federal level, they prefer to text you and say look, we have this problem, can you reach the Ministry of Environment, can you reach this or that. They would text, they do not write, I guess it is easier, it is faster, and it is cheaper. And because like I said, the computer literacy level is low and people do not actually walk around with the laptops, it just makes sense to text.

The above statement summed up the communication process between the legislators and their constituents. Another representative confirmed that receiving text messaging is easy and convenient for her, she stated that: "Those who cannot get me during the day can send me text messages and when I resume in the office I usually call one of my staff to retrieve all the messages in my cell phones and we reply them accordingly". This experience actually emphasized the convenience and accessibility of text messaging. Unlike cell phone, text messaging does not constitute any hindrance to the elected representatives. When representatives are busy with other legislative functions, and they cannot use their cell phones, they can always retrieve their text messages at a convenient time.

One of the participants explained that "Almost six out of ten people you meet in my constituency know my telephone number, they call me, and they send text messages". Most of the participants interviewed agreed that they receive several text messages from their constituents every day. One legislator said: "if I opened my text message box, you will discover that over 75% of the messages therein have to do with communication from my constituents". Though the participants agreed that most of the text messages they received from their constituents were mainly personal demands for one form of assistance or the other. Despite this challenge, participants agreed that the text

messaging is more convenient for them to deal with than direct phone calls.

Some of the unique characteristics of the mobile technology identified by participants include: convenience, portability, low cost, potential for massive distribution of information and it is readily accessible. The study revealed that text messaging seems to hold a greater potential for representatives to be connected with their constituents, to engage with citizens in political dialogues, and decision making process, especially those who are living in remote (rural) areas.

From the participants' personal accounts, I recognized that text messaging technology is an important communication tool for the elected representatives in Nigeria, and it is a growing phenomenon, which I described as Politexting. One of the legislators captured the text messaging phenomenon this way:

I can't imagine if we don't have text messages, if we don't have telephone services, I can't imagine what would have happened. There isn't much use of email because not very many people have access to computers. I could imagine if there is absence of cell phone, the challenges could have been much more. But it's very convenient and very effective to communicate through the cell phone and most importantly via text messages.

One can safely conclude that Politexting (i.e the use of text messaging in politics) is a breakthrough communication tool, and an increasing potent technology in political communication. With today's technology, text messaging gives one the ability to retrieve messages from other cell phones immediately. It allows individuals to review their messages at their convenience- anywhere, at anytime. Participants in this study confirmed that text messaging allows them to receive alerts quietly when decisions and immediate actions are required on topical issues in their constituencies. One participant stated that his constituents kept him abreast of developments in the constituency through text messaging. "They (constituents) will call you, they will send text messages to you, they will tell you what they want, and if there is any problem, they will alert you through the text messages or if there is any development, they will call your attention to it".

Findings from this study confirmed previous studies that showed that text messaging is in the process of changing political communication landscape in Africa and the world. This represents a gradual shift in professional commitments or shared beliefs ("scientific revolutions"). The study reinforces the fact that mobile technology provides new and innovative communication channel that empowers the people, and gives voice to the voiceless. The use of text messaging technology by legislators promises to bridge the communication gap between elected representatives and their constituents. A major advantage of text messaging technology is that the service is readily available on most of the cell phones, and it does not require Internet connectivity or any special equipment. For instance one of the participants stated that:

It is just a question of some few minutes, as you speak everybody is aware of it, and you can send one text messages to several people in ten Wards, in that one text message people in the ten Wards will receive this message instantly.

The current growth in the use of text messaging worldwide is astronomical. The International Communication Union (ITU), a leading United Nations agency for information and communication technology issues stated in its 2010 ICT facts and figures annual report that the total number of SMS sent globally tripled between 2007 and 2010, from an estimated 1.8 trillion to a staggering 6.1 trillion. In other words, close to 200 000 text messages are sent every second. This statistics indicates that text messaging is a breakthrough communication tool as more people, organizations and businesses integrate text messaging into their communication and business strategies.

5. CONCLUSION

Three main characteristics of convenience, effectiveness, and affordability (cost-effectiveness) differentiate Politexting from any other form of political communication, and it has made Politexting the most popular form of private political communication tool. In addition, these three conditions have endeared elected representatives, especially in emerging democracies such as Nigeria to adopt the new communication technology at a faster rate. However, despite the growing reliance and the

influence of new technologies, the traditional methods of communication such as face-to-face, town hall meetings, radio, and television still played important roles in political communication. Additional future research efforts should involve the exploration of a two-way communication dynamics between elected representatives and citizens. It would be interesting study to research the impact and the use of text messaging by citizens to communicate with their elected representatives. In addition, it would also be interesting to examine the importance of traditional communication methods and social capital among citizens, and how these affect the emergence of the new technologies. Other areas of interest could be an investigation into how elected representatives are coping with, and managing the influx of text messaging from their constituents. Finally, it would be of great value to understand how this phenomenon is changing the political communication strategy, and interaction of legislators with their constituents.

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