

Social Media and Ghana's 2012 Election Petition—A Discussion

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Received 23 June 2014; revised 21 July 2014; accepted 20 August 2014

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Abstract

For about five decades after independence, the media in Africa had been dominated by traditional mass communication such as radio, television and the print. But with development in internet technologies, coupled with developments in mobile communication devices, such tendencies begun to wane, and the resultant effect was the blend of the old and new media. This paper therefore discusses some of the activities that were threaded on social media platforms, and then identifies particular effects that such activities had on the petition sessions. As social media was deemed to have been critical in the Arab Spring of 2010, and in the general political landscape of the continent (campaigns, political rallies, elections, etc.), it has also been a significant part of the 2012 Election Petition Hearings in Ghana.

Keywords

Social Media, Election Petition, Ghana, Politics, Information in Society

1. Introduction

Developments in social media adoption and use in Africa have attained tremendous heights, especially within the past decade, as information and communication have been much emphasized (UNDP, 2013; Dutta & Lanvin 2013; BBC World Service Trust, 2010). Not only has such development been keen in agriculture, rural development, economics, education, science and technology, but also in politics (Ross, 2010; International Crisis Group, 2011). From political discussions on traditional media, through electoral campaigns, to popular revolutions in North Africa, social media has consumed political activity on the continent, and there seems not to be an avenue to evade this phenomenon. As a result, stakeholders of political activities on the continent are responding by developing themselves to fit this social media revolution.

For about five decades after independence, the media in Africa had been dominated by traditional mass com-

munication such as radio, television and the print (Karikari, 2007). And therefore political activities tended to concentrate on these media. This has been identified as a catalyst for military overthrows (coup d'états) recorded on the continent; as such media could easily be controlled from a centre (Karikari, 2007). But with development in internet technologies, coupled with developments in mobile communication devices, such tendencies begun to wane, and the resultant effect was the blend of the old and new media (Patnaik, 2011). In this past decade, social (new) media, mostly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, have complemented the means of communication even by traditional news agencies (Giroux et al., 2013; Chui et al., 2012).

With the developments in social media and African politics, questions arise whether social media did influence hearings of Ghana's 2012 election petition. And if it did, what was its effect on the hearings. Caution is however made that such a discussion is limited to the hearings of the Supreme Court of Ghana, and not in any way connected to the final verdict. This paper therefore discusses some of the activities that were threaded on social media platforms, and then identifies particular effects that such activities had on the petition sessions. The methodology adopted was qualitative and involved data mining (Asur & Huberman, 2010; Ruotsalainen, 2008; Han & Gao, 2009; Baradwaj & Pal, 2011) from popular social media sites; namely Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus, and YouTube.

Review of these social media sites then expanded and redirected the scope to other social media tools such as blogs and wikis. Some websites were also contacted to confirm items mentioned in some discussions on social media. Identifiable social media pages of stakeholders of the election petition hearings, including the petitioning and responding parties, civil society groups, and security agencies were searched for and reviewed. Hash tags and search strings were other techniques used for finding social media content on the proceedings captured on these platforms. Following has tags directed data mining activities to individuals and organizations that created more content on the subject of study. Content analysis was also used to identify and aggregate common trends worth discussing.

2. Findings—Social Media and Ghana's 2012 Election Petition Hearings

Social media is the term commonly given to web and mobile-based channels and tools that allow users to interact with each other and share opinions and content. As the name implies, social media involves the building of communities or networks and encouraging participation and engagement (CIPR, 2011). They serve as tools capable of utility by any individual or institution for the purpose of information provision, generating feedback, promoting discussion (Patnaik, 2011; Zanamwe et al., 2013). Between the period of April 16 and August 29, 2013, many activities threaded on social media sites concerning Ghana's 2012 election petition hearings. These activities were undertaken by various stakeholders of the hearings, individuals and institutions alike. This current study identified common trends among these social media activities as; the provision of public information concerning the proceedings; commentaries and the expression of opinions; advocacy; and humour.

2.1. Provision of Public Information

Social media platforms were used during the landmark election petition hearings for providing public information. To this end, stakeholders including political parties (mostly NDC and NPP), news agencies and civil society groups, employed social media avenues to augment their traditional means of information provision. Any new development during the period was immediately posted on social media sites and links made to official websites. For example there was a tweet from the Ghana police Service that informed of the apprehension of 25 people in Kpassa, a town in the Nkwanta North District of the Volta Region. And the American Embassy in Ghana used social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook to clarify the skeptical reception accorded to its security alert to US citizens in Ghana. Major news agencies such as the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) and the MyJoyOnline employed Google Plus and YouTube channels to promote their reach on the petition's coverage.

2.2. Commentaries and Expression of Opinions

Another set of activities that treaded on social media sites concerning the petition hearings was commentaries on the proceedings of the court. Such commentaries were real-time on social media, as the proceedings were simultaneously broadcasted on television and radio. Some commentaries were objective analysis of the proceed-

ings, as others towed usual partisan arguments. Opinions were also expressed with regards to the conduct of some officers of the court, and general proceedings. Through these new media, the average follower of the proceedings could express his or her opinion on anything and at anytime and from any part of the globe, provided they had internet access. Examples of such expressions of opinions were recorded on the YouTube channel of MyJoyOnline for Day 4 (22-4-13) and Day 7 (25-4-13).

Many platforms were created using social media to promote discussions on the subject, including a group called Ghana Supreme Court—Election Petition Centre on Facebook, and Twitter discussions that used hash tags #ElectionPetition and #TheVerdict (Credit: Blogging Ghana). Jamila Abdulai, on behalf of Ghana Decides (a Civil Society Organization), also moderated a discussion of the final verdict via Google Plus' Hangout platform. A similar online discussion was moderated by Kobby Blay, and statements from such discussions were tweeted; an aggregate of which is found on their www.storify.com page.

2.3. Advocacy

Probably the most treaded activity on social media for the period; many advocacy campaigns were witnessed on popular social media sites. Various projects and campaigns were launched and promoted, mostly on social media sites, for various causes in relation to the election petition hearing. Whiles some were calling for peace, others were calling for justice. The One Ghana Project for instance was initiated by three students of the School of Communication Studies of the University of Ghana to advocate peace during and after the verdict was announced; and the main platform used was Facebook, posting pictures of public figures who vowed for peace. Star Ghana funded many peace messages that were circulated on the YouTube channels of many individuals and organizations. The Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) and Ghana Decides (@GhanaDecides) also channeled their peace advocacy activities across mostly twitter and Facebook accounts. Political parties involved in the legal tussle and their leaders were not left out, but also used their social media presence to calm nerves especially before the verdict.

2.4. Humour

Other than the usual seriousness attached to political activities in Africa, Ghana's 2012 election petition hearings attracted some comic elements that seemed to work magic for the country. Some creative pictures and videos that conveyed different humorous contents were spreading like wildfire on social media platforms. There was a picture on Whatsapp Messenger and other platforms that portrayed skinny ugly-looking soldiers who sought to warn the public of misbehavior; and another that had an old woman sitting with her weapon (dagger) stuck in her cloth and ready for "all die be die". The Black Narrator has a great deal of cartoons work on his Facebook profile. Akosua, from the daily guide newspaper, also has some interesting comical cartoons available on social media.

The direction of this discussion is not to imply an absence of negative and abusive tendencies of some of the activities. Indeed there were elements of personality attacks, hate speeches, and the like¹. But the focus of this discussion is to identify the major threading issues on social media during the entire spectrum of proceedings on the election petition, and through that identify any effect they had on the hearings. But the focus of this discussion is to identify the major threading issues on social media during the entire spectrum of proceedings on the election petition, and through that identify any effect they had on the hearings.

3. Effects: Social Media Influenced Ghana's 2012 Election Petition Hearings

As expected of any social phenomenon, social media threads had some influences on the 2012 election petition hearings, primary of which was the creation of an informed and educated public². The creation of an informed public also had rippling effects on the general petition hearing, of which include a collective creation of Ghanaian knowledge, transparency in court proceedings, and general law and order within the Ghanaian society during

¹In fact the Ghana Police Service was caused to announce a hunt for social media followers who used such platforms to churn fear and panic among the public (Gyasiwaa, 2013).

²Credit to this achievement of social media is however owed to the media coverage rights granted by the Judicial Service of Ghana, and especially her Ladyship Chief Justice Georgina Theodora Wood. Such an arrangement made it possible for video footages from the courtroom to be publicly available, and its subsequent threads on social media.

the period under discussion.

3.1. A More Informed and Educated Public

Traditionally, journalists would have listened to proceedings and probably interviewed some party-aligned attorneys for comments before reporting events from the Supreme Court. This would have under normal circumstances made public information highly dependent on the interpretations of these intermediaries, and capable of misconstruction. But as video files from the proceedings flooded YouTube channels and discussions threaded on other social media platforms, and with links to daily transcripts of the proceedings, interested parties within Ghana and abroad could review every bit of the courtroom proceedings—even the drama. As a result, no room for misinformation was left open. Social media had virtually filled in the information gap that would otherwise have resulted from enclosed courtroom proceedings. And every section of the listening (following) public had a satisfaction of information need; literate and illiterate alike.

A similar effect of the social media broadcast was an education for many people who were not up-to-terms (conversant) with legal proceedings. Education in this context specifically means public awareness on legal concepts, terminologies, and generally legal proceedings. During the court proceedings, many terms and concepts such as “I put it to you”, “I suggest to you”, *amicus curiae*, contempt, councils, order in court, motions, and the like were used by officers of the court, and this trickled into public discourses as members of the listening public were readily digesting such contents, also on social media. In effect, many willing-to-know followers sought understanding of such legal concepts; which also afforded the public an opportunity to discuss legal proceedings. Apart from the non legally-inclined publics, students of law and some attorneys took the opportunity to acquire some experience of landmark proceedings of the sort from asynchronous access to social media videos.

3.2. A Collective Creation of Ghanaian Knowledge

Social media not only provided an avenue to inform and discuss proceedings of the petition hearings, but also provided the people of Ghana an opportunity to collectively record an event with such a national dimension. If not for social media involvement, the responsibility for recording the events would have been primarily left in the hands of clerks of the Supreme Court, and journalists of various media houses. Knowledge on this event would therefore have been monopolized by these few institutions, and any attempt to compile a scholarly work, for example, would therefore have meant contacting such institutions—with its attendant challenges. But social media availability, together with its multimedia knowledge recording capacity, knowledge was collectively created by the people of Ghana. Knowledge created on this landmark event may therefore include the official records of the Supreme Court of Ghana, reports carried out by news agencies, and social media video files, transcripts and commentaries.

3.3. Transparency in Proceedings

As there were more avenues to channel information from the courtroom proceedings, there were fewer rooms for suspicions. It was reckoned prior to the hearings that interested parties to the petition were likely to flood the Supreme Court premises. Truly, this may have been the situation, as suspecting publics would have been interested in first hand information, and therefore pushed for space, at least in the court premises. But as the events were telecasted and streamed on social media, there was little need for such reactions. This was the situation to the extent that, people even neglected television broadcast, as they could follow events later from social media. Public commentators and political activists could therefore not relay inappropriate and inconsistent information to the public, as they were privy to first-hand information.

3.4. General Law and Order

As a result of activities identified in this paper and that which generally took place on social media, law and order was the norm during the fifty (50) days exercise. No member of the public could “pollute” another, and proceedings could continue unabated as members of the public were not in any means attracted to crowd the premises of the Supreme Court. Advocacies made through social media to a great extent also achieved their objectives as they mostly called for a united Ghana after the verdict; peace, and justice. The moments before the verdict and its aftermath showed the general works that had been done by Ghanaians in general, and through social

media in particular. For such reasons it can generally be concluded that social media also influenced the maintenance of law and order within the period. This does not in any way indict security provisions made, but rather a compliment to efforts and all other measures put in place to this end.

4. Conclusion

It has been discussed in this paper that the relationship between social media and African politics has been close, and may be getting more intricate. Between the fifty (50) days period of the elections petitions hearing at the Supreme Court of Ghana, many activities threaded on social media sites. These activities resulted in the provision of public information concerning the proceedings, commentaries and opinions expressed, advocacy, and humour. The effect was that these activities had rippling effects, of which included the creation of an informed and educated public on legal proceedings, a collective creation of Ghanaian knowledge, transparency in the proceedings of the court, and general law and order within the Ghanaian society. As social media was deemed to have been critical in the Arab Spring of 2010, and in the general political landscape of the continent (campaigns, political rallies, elections, etc.), it has also been a significant part of the 2012 Election Petition Hearings in Ghana. Once again, the main objective of the study was to provide insight into social media activities during the period, based on findings from data mined. It is hoped that the discussion will contribute to cross-disciplinary social media research in Ghana and the continent at large. It is recommended that further studies be conducted on the issue, employing other methods of data collection and analysis, for the purpose of validation and greater evidence.

Acknowledgements

The Ghana Information Network for Knowledge Sharing (GINKS) is acknowledged, as this discussion was initiated by the organization. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GINKS.

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