IDENTITY POLITICS AND NIGERIAN 2015 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF FEEDBACK COMMENTS ON SELECTED ONLINE REPORTS OF POLITICAL ISSUES

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Abstract

Interactive media platform provides greater access to information and greater opportunity to express thoughts and opinions. It also provides insight in to people's state of mind, their ideologies and beliefs on issues which they make comments about. Usage of words, manner of expression and language pattern are indicative of people's motives and beliefs on national conversations. This study examines the readers' comments on Nigerian online news reports with the aim of understanding readers' attitudes on political issues during 2015 presidential elections. Since the readers' comments are anonymous most times and because many people do not use their true identity, they provide insight into the true state of people's mind, beliefs and attitudes and the implications of these on the corporate existence of Nigeria as a nation. Using discourse analysis approach, data comprising 45 comments which were online readers' feedbacks from *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times* based on two political issues were analysed. These issues are the postponement of 2015 presidential elections often regarded as the *Polls Shift* and Buhari's certificate crisis. Findings reveal that readers are largely divided along ethnic, religious and political parties' affiliations. Besides, hate comments pervade the feedbacks, an indication of politics of bitterness in practise in Nigeria. It is therefore necessary that mechanism is put in place to ensure that readers' comments are not used to cause disaffection among the citizenry but rather for viable, rational and robust discussion that will deepen our democratic practices. Similarly, Nigerian government needs to work to ensure true integration among the various divides that make up the entity called Nigeria and also ensure good governance to avoid people's hatred.

Keywords: Discourse, Feedback, Identity Politics, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

The space for political discourse has been widened by the Internet especially the web 2.0 technology which makes it possible for users to generate their own content. The communication space is no longer a uni-directional affairs but an instant multi-directional transaction. This is what Oyero (2007) refers to as 'many senders and many receivers', going by the way the internet has allowed reception and imparting of

information, opinion, thoughts, etc from several people to others.

The social media and other interactive mechanisms have been well explored by the mainstream media to further their reach and attract audience to them. The Nigerian media, both print and broadcast, are not left out in the trend of online presence giving opportunity to readers/ viewers alike to react to news and opinions. This, of course, is very beneficial to democracy in Nigeria as it expands citizen's participation in the political affairs.

As the interactive platform provides greater access to information and greater opportunity to express thoughts and opinions, it also provides insight in to people's state of mind, their ideologies and beliefs on issues which they make comments about. Usage of words, manner of expression and language pattern are indicative of people's motives and beliefs on national conversations. Examining this light of Nigerian 2015 Presidential elections, one comes to the realisation that the issue identity politics, coupled with deep hatred are quite endemic in the Nigerian political system. This paper thus shows, through the analysis of comments made by readers of online reports, that Nigeria is not yet a united entity and greater efforts should be applied to changing people's mindset for the purpose of a strong united nation.

2. INTERNET AND THE PUBLIC SPACE

One of the key elements of democracy is the liberalisation of government and the opportunity it creates for the political administrators and the governed to interact and discuss issues of public interest on a level playing field. This takes place in a public space and it is aptly referred to as the public sphere. The public sphere is a consciously or unconsciously created public space where individuals in a liberal society can come together to freely identify and discuss social problems with one goal- to influence political action. Dean (2003, p. 95) defines the public sphere as "the site and subject of liberal democratic practice. It is that space within which people deliberate over matters of common concern, matters that are contested and about which it seems necessary to reach a consensus."

Jürgen Habermas in his work, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, published in 1962 (original translation in German but translated to English in 1989) developed the concept of the public sphere (Öffentlichkeit- in German). He was of the view that Öffentlichkeit was a culture that emerged during the 18th century and was characterised by a public space outside the control of the state but a place where individuals irrespective of class or status exchanged views, ideas and knowledge. Habermas argues that newspapers, journals, reading clubs, masonic lodges, salons and coffee houses in the 18th century made up the public space that portrayed the public sphere.

The original criteria for the composition of the public sphere as conceptualised and elucidated by Dean (2003, p. 96):

First, there was disregard for social status, a fundamental parity among all participants such that the authority of the better argument could win out over social hierarchy. Second, new areas of questioning and critique were opened up as culture itself was produced as a commodity to be consumed. Third, the newly emerging public was, in principle, open and inclusive. Anyone could access that which was discussed in the public sphere. These abstractions led Habermas, fourth, to conceptualise the public sphere in terms of reason. So, we have a set of norms: equality, transparency, inclusivity, rationality. These norms apply to actions within the public sphere.

Gerhards and Neidhardt (1993) mention three kinds of fora within the public sphere. The first forum is 'encounter public sphere', which consists of daily face-to-face communication between people resident in a community. This type of communication takes place mostly in pubs, coffee shops, parks, salons, etc., and it has no fixed organisational structure although it gives the people ample opportunity to discuss issues that affect them. They point out that this kind of forum has a weak impact on society because the amount of people to be reached is small. The second forum is 'public events', which includes public lectures, town hall meetings or even protest campaigns. These events have minimal organisational structures, although specialists and opinion leaders are key players in this forum, and they are likely to dominate the communication process. The third forum in the public sphere is formed by the mass media. They argue that the mass media have full-fledge technical and organisational infrastructure that gives them an edge above the other two fora. This forum is dominated by journalists and media experts, whereas the audience are usually made to play passive role of receivers. The mass media have a significant impact on society as it has the ability to reach a large heterogeneous audience, and aids in opinion formation.

There is a cyber-transformation of the public sphere from where it used to be, salons, coffee houses to virtual sphere, championed through the use of the internet. Gerhards and Schäfer (2009, p. 3) compare the

old media with the internet and the major differences are their structural prerequisites, openness for participation, and their influence on the wider society. They further argue that many political scientists, media researchers and other scholars, as well as political activists, believe the internet as a new medium has the potential to fundamentally change societal communication and that in a nutshell, internet communication makes a better public sphere than the old media.

The internet has become a new significant medium compared to the often criticised old media such as radio, television and newspapers. This is because the internet is becoming ever more accessible to more people worldwide including Nigeria especially with the recent developments in the mobile telephony industry. It is also used more often, and is increasingly considered a legitimate source of information. This phenomenon has cause players in the traditional media to provide access for their contents on the internet utilising the social media platform (Facebook, Twitter, Google+, YouTube, Instagram, etc.). This is the reason why newspapers like *The Punch, The Nation, The Guardian, The Sun, Vanguard* just to mention a few, and some radio and television stations have found a way to publish the digital format of their contents on the internet and provided a forum for audience feedback and interaction. This reflects the idea of a contemporary public sphere.

However, Dahlgren (2005, p. 151) raises concerns on the viability of the internet as a public sphere. The use of the internet for political purposes is clearly minor compared with other purposes to which it is put. The kinds of interaction taking place can only to a small degree be considered manifestations of the public sphere; democratic deliberation is completely overshadowed by consumerism, entertainment, non-political networking and chat (Oyero & Jegede, 2011); that is an issue not meant for the present discussion.

3. IDENTITY POLITICS IN NIGERIA

Identity is a strong aspect of human existence and it reflects in our relationships, because every person desires to belong to an association. Erickson (1968, p. 57) defines identity as "a person's sense of belonging to a group if (it) influences his political behaviour. Jega (2000, p. 14) points out the attributes of identity as "commitment to a cause", "love and trust for a group", emotional tie to a group", as well as "obligations and responsibilities" relating to membership of a group with which a person identifies. Therefore, identity politics in other words, according to Calhoun (1994) is basically politics either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonists in national political struggles over access to the state and to avenues of accumulation (See also Jega [2000]). Jega (2000, p. 15) argues that identity politics involves the mobilisation of identity consciousness in order to create a mass base of support for the ruling classes, and the elite generally in their factional struggles in the accumulation process.

Identity politics cannot be fully discussed without an understanding of the complex entity called 'Nigeria'. Nigeria is a nation of multiple ethnic nationalities. An ethnic group comprises of people of distinctive language, religion, culture, social structure and territorial autonomy." Ahamba (2000) states that over 250 ethnic groupings are said to exist in Nigeria. Nigeria is regarded also as Africa's most populous country, with an estimated 180 million people. Also Islam and Christianity which are the two dominant religions are nearly equally represented, while African traditional religions are also prevalent (Lewis, 2011, p. 2).

Nigeria's corporate existence is reflected by the diversity in the ethnic groupings. Nigeria remains a nation of strange bedfellows due to its ethnic diversity that has refused to blend. Various ethnic nationalities cry of marginalisation in certain aspects of the nation's dealings. Some even agitate for secession and the numerous ethnic frictions among Nigerians have bred problems for the nation in the past, the Nigerian civil war is a typical example."

The main areas of concern in Nigerian identity politics is ethnicity and religion, while gender sometimes plays in the background. Salawu (2013, p. 41) corroborates this view thus, "In Nigeria there is a growing phenomenon of differentiation based on ethnicity of which there is a religious dimension. The conflict here is usually between the two major religions in the country- Christianity and Islam. Because of the nation's configuration, however, the strand of religion is usually intertwined with that of ethnicity." Ngwodo (2015, para. 1) shares similar views noting that, "Our dominant intellectual and political paradigm views Nigeria's social order through the prisms of ethnicity and religion. All realities and facts supposedly make sense only when interpreted in tribal and religious idioms. Complex socio-political and economic issues are reduced to their sectarian dimensions and transmitted to the centre of public discourse. This is even more so during an election cycle."

What is the major concern with identity politics, especially in Nigeria? Kofi Annan in his report on identity politics, made the following observation:

This particularistic and exclusionary form of identity politics has intensified in recent years within and among nations... It is responsible for some of the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law and, in several instances, of elementary standards of humanity... Negative forms of identity politics are a potent and potentially explosive force. Great care must be taken to recognise, confront and restrain them lest they destroy the potential for peace and progress that the new era holds in store (*The Guardian,* 1997, p.8).

Ethnicity and religion have increasingly become divisive in Nigeria and have exacerbated tension along several fault lines. Omilusi (2015, p. 1) points out that weak institutions and mobilisation of identity groups are often exploited by the Nigeria's ruling class for their own selfish benefit. Agu (2010, p. 10) also supports this view, especially in the context of religious identity. "Political activists exploit the religious factor, knowing that the religious factor is the deepest and strongest rallying point. It has strong images or symbols, values and commitments; it evokes strong emotions." Drawing lessons from the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, Ngwodo (2015, para. 1) comments thus "The 2015 presidential election which pits a Southern Christian incumbent president against a Northern Muslim challenger seems tailor-made for cliché-ridden analyses that invoke Nigeria's fable cleavages. On the face of it, this ought to be straight foreword fight between Nigeria's north and south; or her Christian and Muslim communities."

4. METHODOLOGY

The study is basically qualitative, adopting discourse analysis approach. The data for this study comprised a purposively obtained sample of 45 news readers' comments on two political issues in Nigeria within January and March 2015. The two political issues are the postponement of 2015 presidential elections often regarded as the ***Polls Shift*** and **Buhari's certificate crisis**. These comments were drawn from the feedback platforms of four Nigerian online news websites which are *The Punch*, *Vanguard*, *Sahara Reporters* and *Premium Times.* The selection of these news media is purposive, based on the fact that the selected news media platforms have been able to gather wide readership as evident in their feedback platforms. A qualitative analysis of data is carried out in this study. Sampled readers' comments are numbered C1- C45 (*C* representing *comments*) and are analysed under discursive themes that reflect deliberate lexical choices and linguistic strategies.

5. RESULTS

Data obtained show that online news comments are divided along ethnic, religious and political party lines and their comments cramped with hate speeches and abuses. We observe the use of generalization, lexicalization, hyperbole, examples and evidentially in the comments made.

5.1 Ethnicity

Ethnic leaning came to the fore in the comments made by readers. Though the issues involved have nothing to do with any ethnic group, ethnic sentiments were brought in to moderate the issues. Following comments made reference to this:

An igbo man voting for buhari?, have you learn't nothing from history? I'm sincerely sorry for you. What is in there for you and your people?(C1)

Foolani the game is over, no quoter system for you or buhari any more, get ready to form your arewa republic parasites (C4)

...this race is tribe versus tribe..if goodluck wants to come back its because the northerners feels ruling nigeria is their birthright not that he can do better..all apc leaders are former pdp members..goodluck has really practiced democracy otherwise he would have declared borno state bokoharam state and destroyed the state. (C2)

So you no get fear to insult a president like that, but for your information a yoruba man has not being the president of nigeria before, because the two times obasanjo ruled that opportunity and empowerment was given to him by the hausas(C3)

The comments above, when examined closely revealed the ethnic cleavages that attended 2015 presidential election. C1 is likely to be a comment from one of the ethnic groups, criticising another Igbo for supporting the candidacy of Muhammadu Buhari for the president. His perception is that supporting Buhari would not yield any benefit for the Igbos. "*I'm sincerely sorry for you. What is in there for you and your people?"*

The second comment derided another ethnic group, calling Fulani –"*Foolani*". He also made reference to Arewa (indication of Northerner) and called it 'parasites'. It became very clear from the 3rd comments (C2)

that the election was a tribal struggle. Since Buhari is from the North and Jonathan is from the South. We see this ethnic division visibly as ethnic names, Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, Fulani etc. keep showing in the comments that people made.

5.2 Religion

Coming after ethnicity is religion as shown in the following comments:

That boy is an alfa of teblic dangerous Islamic sect, so he reasons clearly like Muhammad and thinks everybody likes killing as usual Islamic way of doing things. (C5)

I believe you. These guys are crazy enough to think they can pull it off. The north won't stand for it though. Strangely, it will be Jonathan who ends up Islamising nigeria. Any revolution would be Islamic since they're the only ones who would have the courage to stand up to the security forces, and they would end up in charge as they would have fought for the new independence from the corrupt cabal that's held us hostage since 1960. Even if the election held in 10 days' time, Nigeria as it is has come to an end. Chaos whichever way we turn weekend after next. (C6)

According to sahara reporters the janjaweeds progressives are the 'powerful' all progressives congress. A party known for failure ati illiterates ati Islamises is powerful. What a joke (C7)

We christian community will not allow isil to rule us. Watch out

Christians all over the world has liberal and secular mind. But you know immediately you guys enter power na killing be una food . Pursueing non existing virgin somewhere. (C8)

We see derogatory statements expressed about another religion, apparently referencing the bastardly activities of Boko Haram terrorist group. Several comments actually uncomplimentary linked Islam with Boko Haram and used that as a pretext for condemning Islamic religion. Anti-Christianity comments too are expressed in various dimensions. Noteworthy to mention that stories that readers commented about focused on shift in the date of presidential election, and the certificate issue of President Buhari, but religious baises heavily reflected in the various comments.

5.3 Politics

Pdp sim card!!! I hail thee o! Pls tell us how jona will win this feb 14th elections now that all is dirty games are haunting him shamelessly...peeeedeeeepeeeee siiiiiiiim!!! Power to the shameless being!!! (C13)

A fee cee, retrogressive change. Fraudsters, perjury criminals, embezzlers of people's ptf.) Murderers. Illiterates. Jonathan will win both at polls or when the 9th of failbuhari comes. (C15)

Why is the pdp afraid to face the verdict of nigerians if their claims of dumbo having outperformed nelson mandela, barak obama... And even jesus of nazareth is anything to go by? Jega or any judge who truncates this general elections should note that he bears sublime guilt if innocent blood is shed in the ensuing calamity such decision will certainly elicit. Nigerians have had their noses full of the pdp after 16-tortous-years, and are ready to blow out the mucus by saying, eie on febuhari 14... Schikena! (C16)

Comments made by readers are based on political party sentiments irrespective of the issue under discussion. The comments made showed the severity of contest between the two dominant political parties in the 2015 presidential election. Those in favour of the then incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan of People's Democratic Party castigated APC, and vice versa. Winning election was uppermost to the commentators without consideration of suitable candidate for the office of the president. Derogatory names were used in describing the opposing comments.

As seen in the comments above, PDP was described as 'SIM card' and 'Shameless being'. The pronunciation of APC was bastardized as 'A fee cee'and described as fraudsters, criminals, embezzlers, etc. The political parties general criticized one another and presented the opposing party as unfit for governance.

5.4 Hate speeches

Comments are riddled with hate speeches. The battle line was between APC and PDP and hate speakers were very visible in the comments. Check up the following:

If you don't like gej, go and dive into Atlantic ocean, travel over daura to sahara desert or migrate to anywhere, so that boko haram could be your leader there, but not in Nigeria. Very soon, boko haram would be 'smoked out of their holes' like sadam was smoked out. Agents of backwardness days are numbered till buhari would be crying for losing 2015 election. If you want to fight, come out to meet your death on the

street. Remember, that their own children are already out of the country before the Election Day. Do not be a fool to come on the street to fight for him. (C18)

The comments above were made by PDP supporter. Daura is the home town of APC presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari, and the base of Boko Haram terrorist group was in the Northerner Nigeria where Buhari came from.

The next comment is from an APC supporter:

The bribe money they have collected from jonathan and pdp will choke all of them to death. Do these fools have power in their offices and houses, do they have safe clean drinking water to drink, do their children get quality education, does their families get quality health care from any hospital, are their families safe and secure? The people that are in these parties are a bunch of deranged lower animals who will burn in hell because they don't love nigeria. (C19)

He described PDP party members as 'deranged lower animals who will burn in hell…'

The following comments are still in line with the party politics assertion:

What are you saying? You have never made any sense on this forum ati the punch ati vanguard. What side of the political divide are you pitching your tenth? I won't be surprised if you are with the shariarist progressives. With certificate-less brains-how sad. (C23)

Fani kayode was a psychiatric patient (C26)

Paid jaguda you are!!! (C30)

Only a black monkey like you will reason so. (C37)

Now I am convinced that you are totally mad, stupid and uneducated, there is no reason to reply to your comments anymore since it is obvious that you are very corrupt and crazy. Common, are you for real? (C41)

5.5 Abuses and Curses

Some of the comments are outright abuses and cursed pronounced. See the following:

The terror we fall upon you and your families. (C43)

Disappointment shall be thy portion and not gmb's in jesus name! (C45)

6. DISCUSSION

The data presented show the severity of division, cleavages, hatred, animosity and desperation that characterised the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. It is worth noting, that the commenters were not discussing topical issues about the election. One would have expected that people bring superior arguments to the forum as relates to issues of good governance, provision of infrastructures, education, healthcare, employment, human rights, etc. but instead of discussing issues, people only discussed based on party affiliation, religion leanings, ethnic belonging and emotions. This is not really good for our democracy. While the internet has enlarged the media space and given opportunity for people to express themselves, such opportunity should be better used to enhance democracy and demand good governance from the government.

Ethnicity is a very important issue in Nigeria. People usually see government actions, appointments, decisions, pronouncements and choice of candidates in elections through the lense of ethnicity. This is one issue that should be handled with care. The nation needs to come to a point where citizens will not see themselves as belonging to a particular ethnic group but seeing themselves as Nigerians. This is a great task that needs to be achieved if the nation will move forward.

Religion is another sensitive issue. Two religions are dominant in Nigeria. Christianity dominates in the South and Islam in the North. There is always religious suspicion in many government activities in Nigeria. Religion takes a significant place such that both the President and the vice-president cannot belong to the same religious group. Politicians too always capitalise on this to further their political interests. Many a times, religion crises have ensued with hundreds of lives being lost. It is then not unusual that it reflects on the comments made by readers. Religious issues need to be downplayed and people taught how to live peaceably irrespective of the religion being practised.

It is naturally expected that politicians will play games and manipulate the electorates to win people's votes; hence, the criticisms and counter-criticism that characterise the comments made by newspaper readers. But

the citizens need to see beyond the realm of politics and be concerned with issues around good governance irrespective of the political parties involved. Similarly is the use of hate speeches, abuses and curses is unacceptable. People result to hate speeches when they lack issue of substance for discussion. This is not good in the practice of democracy.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The dimension of political, ethnic and religious schism as exhibited in the various readers' comments portend dangers for the continued existence of Nigeria as a country. This therefore calls for caution in order to ensure that the new media is not abused and used for unhealthy purposes. While democracy guarantees free speech, it should not be the pretext for sowing the seed of discord among the citizenry. It might thus be necessary to institute some regulations to ensure that the readers' comments platform and similar channels are not used to cause disaffection among the citizenry but rather for viable, rational and robust discussion that will deepen our democratic practices.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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