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Facebook and Public Opinion Formation in Nigeria

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Abstract

With more than 27 million users in Nigeria, Facebook has emerged as an influential platform for public opinion formation. This study examines how Facebook shapes public opinion in Nigeria, focusing on its content algorithm, sponsored advertisements, and user-generated content. Drawing on agenda-setting theory, social learning theory, and selective exposure theory, the study analyzes the mechanisms through which information exposure and user engagement influence public perceptions. The findings indicate that Facebook's extensive reach, algorithmic content curation, sponsored advertising, and user-generated content substantially contribute to opinion formation. However, the platform also facilitates the dissemination of misinformation, reinforces echo chambers, and enables hate speech and incitement to violence. The study concludes that Facebook plays a significant yet potentially disruptive role in Nigeria's public sphere. It recommends greater transparency in content algorithms, stronger fact-checking mechanisms, effective regulation of hate speech and misinformation, increased user awareness of cognitive bias, expanded media literacy campaigns, and collaboration between Facebook and government agencies to protect democratic values and institutions. The study contributes to understanding digitally mediated public opinion in

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Nigeria and underscores the importance of platform accountability, media literacy, and responsible user engagement.

Keywords: Facebook; Content Algorithms; Misinformation; Nigeria; Public Opinion Formation

Introduction

The rise of social media has led to a significant shift in the way people consume and share information. With over 27 million Facebook users in Nigeria, this platform has established itself as a major source of public opinion formation in the country. In recent years, social media has played a vital role in shaping public discourse and influencing decision-making processes. Little wonder why Delli, Carpini and Keeter (2015) note that:

In recent years, the growth of social media platforms has transformed the way people consume and share information, leading to a significant impact on public opinion formation. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, have established themselves as an essential source of information and have become prominent players in shaping public discourse and influencing decision-making processes. social media provides a platform for individuals to engage in public discourse with people having similar interests or views. This engagement is not limited by geographic or social boundaries, and as a result, social media has the potential to amplify public opinion and affect decision-making processes.

Social media platforms have become vital sources of information on issues ranging from politics to public health. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms provided a platform for the dissemination of accurate information on the virus, its transmission, and prevention methods. Radcliffe and Carlson (2018, p. 12) revealed that "social media platforms have a significant impact on public opinion, especially in elections, by influencing the way that people perceive candidates and the issues they represent". Social media has also created a space for marginalized communities to have their voices heard and influence public opinion on sensitive issues such as racism, gender, and sexuality. Social media platforms such as Facebook have established themselves as players in shaping public opinion formation. They provide a means for individuals to share information and engage in public discourse, thus amplifying public opinion. As the influence of social media

continues to grow, it is important to monitor its impact on public opinion and decision-making processes to determine how best to harness the power of these platforms.

Meanwhile, as Nigeria continues to face various political, economic, and social challenges, it is imperative to understand the impact of Facebook on public opinion formation. This is so because, over the years, politicians, celebrities, civil society organizations, and even government agencies have taken advantage of Facebook's reach to communicate with the Nigerian populace. These engagements have influenced public perceptions on issues ranging from governance, security, economics, and social infrastructure. However, numerous studies have been conducted on the impact of social media on public opinion formation in other countries, such as the United States (Delli, Carpini and Keeter, 1996), India (Lau and Cheung, 2012), and China (Wang and Wei, 2012). However, there is a gap in the literature on the specific impact of Facebook on public opinion formation in Nigeria. This research paper seeks to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the impact of Facebook on public opinion formation in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

In Nigeria, social media, especially Facebook, has become a significant tool for public opinion formation. However, despite its wide usage, the credibility and authenticity of information disseminated on social media platforms remain in question. According to Akpan and Osuala (2017), fake news and propaganda are widespread across social media platforms, significantly affecting public opinion on issues of national importance. This phenomenon raises questions about the validity and reliability of public opinion formed through social media engagement. Also, there is the issue of information overload, where individuals are bombarded with an overwhelming amount of information, making it difficult to distinguish between facts and opinions. As Kiernan (2017) observes, it is not only the authenticity of information that is in question, but the sheer volume of information available on social media platforms. Furthermore, the algorithms used by social media platforms often create echo chambers, where people are more likely to see information that conforms to their beliefs and interests. This can significantly influence public opinion formation, as individuals may be less exposed to alternative viewpoints.

Additionally, social media platforms have also been accused of being used to spread hate speech and incite violence. According to Amnesty International (2018), Nigerian politicians and their supporters have been using social media platforms to incite violence

during elections and display tribalism or religious intolerance. Such practices further compromise the credibility of public opinion formed through social media. Thus, it behooves the researchers to ask: Does Facebook influence public opinion formation in Nigeria?

Understanding Public Opinion

Understanding public opinion requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates insights from political science, sociology, psychology, and communication studies. It is crucial to remember that public opinion is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is influenced by various factors such as media, interpersonal communication, political leaders, and social movements. The collected thoughts, feelings, and opinions of a certain group of people or society regarding a range of topics or subjects of public interest are referred to as public opinion. It includes the opinions, preferences, and attitudes that members of a society express, all of which are influenced by social, cultural, political and economic factors. "Those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" is how eminent American political scientist Key (1966) described public opinion. The significance of public opinion in influencing political decisions and governance is emphasized in this concept. Bourdieu (1998, p. 80) sees public opinion as the "collection of socially significant cognitions, evaluations, and preferences that circulate and impose themselves socially and politically as taken-for-granted" is what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defines as public opinion.

Stimson (2004) sees public opinion as "the distribution of individual attitudes about something". This definition highlights the individual nature of public opinion and its aggregation into a broader societal understanding. Public opinion refers to the collective attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments of individuals within a specific population regarding various issues or topics in a society. It represents the general consensus or prevailing viewpoint of the public at a given point in time. Clawson & Oxley (2012) see public opinion as “the politically relevant opinions held by ordinary citizens that they express openly". Public opinion refers to the collective attitudes, beliefs, and viewpoints of the general public regarding a specific issue or topic are referred to as public opinion. It is a significant component of democratic societies since it has a major impact on how public policy is shaped and how decisions are made. As a public opinion specialist, you must take

public opinion into account while creating and carrying out educational policies and programs.

Numerous elements, such as individual experiences, societal and cultural influences, media coverage, and interpersonal interactions, can have an impact on public opinion. To guarantee that educational policies and reforms fulfill the needs and aspirations of the communities they serve, public concerns and viewpoints should be taken into consideration. After assessing public opinion, decision-makers and academic institutions can focus on raising awareness and being open about their programs (Ahmed, 2011). In order to ensure that choices are made cooperatively and in line with community values and expectations, politicians and the general public should better communicate through open channels of communication, public consultations, and community engagement programs. It's also critical to understand that public opinion is dynamic and subject to change over time. Thus, it is imperative to consistently observe and assess public opinion in order to determine the efficacy of educational policies and programs (Femi, 2019). This feedback loop guarantees that modifications can be made to adapt to evolving public preferences and needs.

Concept of Public Opinion Formation

The concept of public opinion formation has been a topic of discussion for years. It is a process through which individuals collectively develop an understanding or judgement about a particular event, issue, or phenomenon. Public opinion plays a crucial role in modern democracies by shaping government policies and actions. According to Lippmann (1922) cited in Okon (2015, p. 41), "Public opinion is created by journalists, politicians and other individuals with a vested interest in shaping public discourse." This statement still holds true today. This is so because these actors have significant power and influence in shaping the views and opinions that the general public holds about various events, issues, or phenomena. Journalists are responsible for reporting and disseminating information to the public. They decide which issues to cover and how to frame them, thereby influencing public perception about the topic. Politicians also have a vested interest in shaping public discourse since they are accountable to the public and rely on public support to remain in power. They use various tactics such as speeches, campaign promises, and public appearances to influence public opinion (Daniel, 2015). Other actors that

influence public opinion include interest groups, advocacy organizations, and social media influencers. These groups work to promote a particular agenda or set of beliefs and use messaging and communication strategies to shape public discourse. For instance, interest groups such as environmental organizations, labor unions, and business groups use lobbying and advocacy to push their agenda in the public domain.

Meanwhile, in the past, public opinion was largely formed by the media. However, with the emergence of new media platforms such as social media, public opinion formation has changed. Citizen journalism and user-generated content have disrupted the traditional media landscape (Gbenga, 2023). Social media has created a more democratic platform where anyone can share their opinion with the world. According to Pew Research Center, about two-thirds of American adults are using social media who can be easily reached in influencing public opinions through these channels (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

An important aspect of public opinion formation is agenda-setting. Agenda-setting refers to the ability of the media to influence what people think about. By choosing which stories and topics to cover, the media can influence public perception. This is why media literacy is crucial in today's society. People need to be aware of the various media they consume and how it influences their beliefs and opinions .

Another factor that plays a role in public opinion formation is cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance occurs when individuals hold two conflicting beliefs or values. People often seek confirmation bias, which is looking for information that supports their beliefs and avoiding information that contradicts it. In today's polarized political climate, this phenomenon has become more evident. Maxwell (2019, p. 17) notes that "cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon that occurs when a person has two or more conflicting attitudes, beliefs, or values. The individual may feel discomfort, anxiety, or uncertainty due to the conflict". To reduce this inner tension, people often tend to seek out information that reinforces their existing beliefs, thereby increasing the cognitive dissonance. This is known as confirmation bias, and it can lead to a reinforcement of pre-existing attitudes and opinions, even when they are based on inaccurate or incomplete information. Joel (2019, p. 41) claims that "in today's polarized political climate, cognitive dissonance has become more apparent. Political partisanship acts as a catalyst for cognitive dissonance by creating a division between groups that hold opposing views and values". This, no doubt, has led to an increased tendency for people to consume information that

reinforces their pre-existing beliefs and values. It can also lead to a breakdown of civil discourse and an inability to engage in constructive conversations with people who hold opposing views. This is because individuals may feel threatened when their beliefs are challenged and may engage in defensive behaviors such as discrediting, dismissing or ignoring opposing views expressed by the other party (Ekong and Udom, 2013).

Be that as it may, the emergence of new media platforms such as social media has disrupted the traditional media landscape, creating a more democratic platform that allows anyone to share their opinion with the world. However, cognitive dissonance plays a role in shaping public opinion by influencing how people perceive and interpret information. People tend to seek out information that reinforces their existing beliefs, thereby increasing the cognitive dissonance and perpetuating their pre-existing opinions, even when they are based on inaccurate or incomplete information (Nsima, 2017). Therefore, it is essential to be media literate by critically evaluating the information we consume and be mindful of our cognitive biases to actively engage in constructive conversations with people who hold opposing views. It is also crucial that actors influencing public opinion act ethically, responsibly, and transparently to ensure that public discourse is a true reflection of the views and interests of the citizens they serve, promoting democratic ideals and institutions.

Facebook and Public Opinion Formation: A Discourse

Facebook is a powerful social media platform that has revolutionized the way we interact with one another. It has also become an influential tool for shaping public opinion. With over 2.8 billion monthly active users, Facebook is a platform where people connect and share content that can have a significant impact on public opinion formation (Cooker, Lui and Frazer, 2015). Public opinion formation refers to people's attitudes and beliefs about an issue. It is about how people form their opinions in response to different stimuli, including social media. Facebook, being a powerful social media platform, plays a vital role in shaping public opinion through the news feed and the sharing of posts, pictures, and videos.

Firstly, Facebook's algorithm plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion. The algorithm decides which posts and pages to show each user, based on their behavior and engagement history. This means that users are more likely to see content that reinforces their existing beliefs and opinions. As a result, users are less exposed to contrasting

viewpoints, creating an "echo chamber" where users only hear and read things that align with their beliefs. Dare (2018, p. 21) notes that “Facebook's algorithm, which determines the content users see on their news feed, is a significant factor in shaping public opinion. The algorithm decides what content to show each user based on their previous behavior and engagement history, meaning that individuals are likely to primarily see content that reinforces their already-existing beliefs and opinions”. This can lead to the creation of an "echo chamber" in which users are only exposed to information that aligns with their beliefs, reducing their exposure to contrasting viewpoints and potentially hindering their ability to form unbiased opinions.

Secondly, the sharing of posts, pictures, and videos on Facebook can also impact public opinion. When users share content, they are endorsing it and encouraging others to engage with it. This increased engagement can lead to increased visibility of the content, resulting in more people forming opinions based on that content. Supporting this, Anu (2021, p. 7) notes that “the sharing of posts, pictures, and videos on Facebook can significantly influence public opinion formation. When users share content on the platform, they are effectively endorsing it and encouraging others to engage with it”. This increased engagement can lead to the content receiving more visibility and influencing more people's attitudes and beliefs. As more people engage with the content, it becomes more visible, leading to a snowball effect that can result in even more people forming their opinions based on that content (Olamide, 2019).

Thirdly, Facebook's sponsored ads can also influence public opinion formation. Advertisers can target users based on their demographics and interests, giving them a more targeted audience to shape opinions. Facebook's sponsored ads are another way the platform can impact public opinion formation. Advertisers can target users based on their demographics and interests, allowing them to reach a more specific and targeted audience. By having the ability to reach such a focused audience, advertisers can create messaging and content that appeals directly to the values, beliefs, and opinions of those users. This targeting can lead to advertisers influencing the opinions of individuals who may have otherwise been less likely to engage with their content through conventional advertising means. Therefore, sponsored ads on Facebook have the potential to shape public opinion by reaching a very targeted audience with customized messaging.

Theoretical Frameworks

Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory was first propounded by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. The theory suggests that the media has significant influence over what issues gain attention in the public arena. This influence comes from the media's ability to determine what stories are covered and how they are reported, which ultimately shapes public opinion on those issues (Moses, 2018). The theory proposes that the media has the power to set the agenda for public discussion and influence what issues gain prominence or attention in the public arena. The media decides which stories to cover and how they are reported, which can drastically affect how much attention a particular topic or issue receives. The power of the media to shape public opinion is derived from the notion that individuals can only be interested in and form opinions on issues they are aware of, and the media holds the power to determine what issues gain awareness in the public domain (Nkeruwem, 2012). The theory is based on the notion that people use the media as a source of information to understand the world around them. Agenda-Setting Theory suggests that the media not only provide people with information but also shape their understanding of what issues are important in society. As a result, the media's power to shape public opinion is not limited to individual stories but rather extends to broader social and political issues.

In the case of Facebook and public opinion formation in Nigeria, social media platforms like Facebook have increasingly become the go-to source of information for many users. As such, the ability of Facebook to set the agenda for public discussion and influence what issues gain attention in Nigeria cannot be overlooked. Through Facebook's content algorithm, the platform can determine what content is presented to users, which can influence what issues or topics gain attention and drive public opinion. The content algorithm controls what users see on their news feed, which can influence what issues users engage with. If certain issues are given more visibility and attention on Facebook, this could shape public opinion on those issues, making Agenda-Setting Theory relevant to the study.

Social Learning Theory

Social Learning Theory was developed by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory suggests that individuals learn by observing the behavior of others and the consequences of those actions. Social Learning Theory suggests that people learn not just by their direct

experiences, but also through observation of others. According to this theory, individuals can acquire new behaviors, knowledge, attitudes, and emotional reactions by observing and imitating the actions and behaviors of others (Segun, 2011). Observational learning also involves understanding the consequences of those behaviors, whether positive or negative, and using that knowledge to shape their own behaviors.

In terms of public opinion formation, Social Learning Theory implies that people's opinions can be influenced by observing the opinions of others, particularly in online social networks like Facebook. When individuals observe the behavior and opinions of others on Facebook, they can develop a sense of what is socially desirable or acceptable and use that as a guide for their own behavior. Therefore, opinions expressed by others on Facebook can shape the opinions of others and ultimately influence public opinion. The theory is particularly important in understanding how public opinion formation occurs on social media platforms like Facebook, where users can observe and learn from the actions and opinions of others in real-time. By observing the actions and opinions of others, users can form opinions and beliefs based on what they see on social media. This can be both positive and negative for the formation of public opinion. On the one hand, it can help promote healthy discussions and the exchange of diverse opinions. On the other hand, it can lead to the formation of echo chambers where individuals are exposed only to views that align with their existing beliefs, leading to confirmation bias and reinforcing pre-existing views.

Selective Exposure Theory

Selective Exposure Theory suggests that individuals are more likely to choose media sources that align with their existing values and beliefs. The theory was initially proposed by Klapper in 1960. The theory proposes that individuals tend to consume and seek out media content that aligns with their pre-existing values and beliefs. People are selective in their choice of media because they are more comfortable with content that supports their already existing opinions. This theory is based on the idea that people seek information that is compatible with their current beliefs and values, and avoid information that is inconsistent with their beliefs (Akpan, 2021).

In line with the study, Selective Exposure Theory suggests that users tend to selectively seek out and engage with content that aligns with their pre-existing views and beliefs. This can be seen in the formation of echo chambers on social media, where users

only see content that confirms their existing views, without being exposed to opposing views. Users may be more likely to engage with content that reinforces their existing beliefs rather than seeking out opposing viewpoints. In other words, users could be more likely to select content that they already agree with on Facebook, which could shape public opinion and reinforce already existing views. This can create polarisation in public opinion, where opposing groups hold diametrically opposed views, without an open or constructive dialogue with opposing groups. The theory has also been used to explain why fake news and misinformation continue to thrive on social networks like Facebook, as individuals who hold certain views may be more likely to be exposed to sources of information that reinforce that view, rather than information that may contradict it. This theory is relevant because users might have a tendency to prefer content that aligns with their opinions on Facebook. Therefore, users' pre-existing biases can play an influential role in determining the issues they consider important and shaping public opinion.

Summary

This paper highlights the significant role Facebook plays in shaping public opinion in Nigeria. The content algorithm, sponsored ads, and user-generated content all contribute to shaping public opinion on Facebook. The paper has also discussed the relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory in understanding public opinion formation on Facebook.

Conclusion

This study has provided an in-depth analysis of the impact of Facebook on public opinion formation in Nigeria. The study has shown that Facebook has become a significant platform for shaping public opinion in Nigeria due to its vast reach and influence. Facebook's algorithm, sponsored ads, and user-generated content all contribute to shaping public opinion on the platform. The study has also highlighted the relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Selective Exposure Theory in understanding public opinion formation on Facebook. However, the study has also identified several challenges, such as the spread of fake news and propaganda and the creation of echo chambers, which can be detrimental to effective public opinion formation. Also, the use of social media to spread hate speech and incite violence poses a significant risk to public

safety. Thus, there is a need for ethical and transparent use of social media platforms and the effective regulation of their use to promote democratic ideals and institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

i. Facebook should ensure transparency in its content algorithm to ensure that users see a balance of content that reflects differing viewpoints and values.
ii. Facebook should partner with civil society organizations to develop a fact-checking mechanism that helps users to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information.
iii. Facebook should develop comprehensive policies to combat hate speech, fake news and misinformation to ensure that public opinion is shaped by authentic and reliable information.
iv. Users of social media should be wary of the tendency to seek out and engage only with content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs or values.
v. There is a need for media literacy campaigns that help users to critically evaluate the information they consume on social media platforms.
vi. Finally, government agencies should engage with social media platforms and civil society organizations to develop policies and strategies that harness the potential of social media to promote democratic values and institutions.

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