

Chapter 46

Internet Mediatization: New Opportunity for Women in Politics?

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ABSTRACT

The political rights of women remain greatly constrained by political structure and traditional practices which many believe are responsible for the exclusion of their interests in decision making process and development paradigms. Anchored on the Democratic Participant Media Theory and Public Sphere Theory, this study evaluated if Internet can mobilize and encourage women to voice their concerns and opinions on political matters. Survey conducted among 200 female academic staff members of universities in the south-east, Nigeria revealed that although the Internet provided the women with needed political information and interaction; it did not significantly induce their interest to participate in politics. The study recommends that women should aggressively utilize the opportunities provided by Internet by forming groups and networks where political issues are analyzed and discussed. Where the nature of relayed message is well focused, chances of using the Internet for inducing political participation can be enhanced.

INTRODUCTION

In all spheres of life, women have experienced one form of discrimination, marginalization or domination or the other by men (CIRDDOC, 2002; Tasie, 2013; Aldoory & Parry-Giles, 2005). The patriarchal social structure in Africa provides a framework upon which the marginalization and discrimination is based. They are not given fair opportunity to participate in decision making processes and so their needs and aspirations are not put into consideration when decisions that affect their lives are taken. This is due to the environment they found themselves whereby they were not given equal opportunities with their male counterparts, even as children. Women are reduced to “unproductive stereotype” (Aldoory & Parry-Giles, 2005) and this made them to become psychologically indifferent to things that concern them, even politics.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7669-3.ch046

The political rights of women remain greatly constrained by culture and practices (Eliasoph, 1998; CIRDDOC, 2002) as some of the culture forbid such equal rights. In African the belief that “women are to be seen, not heard; and “women education ends in kitchen” make many women shy away from political participation so as not to be labeled ‘wayward’ or subjected to public ridicule. Again, political participation is sometimes risky, expensive and requires a great deal of investments from individuals willing to engage in political activities (CIRDDOC, 2002; Nwafor, 2013), and women are unable to match the capacity of men for money (CIRDDOC, 2002).

As a result of these, women are reluctant to neither seek nor participate in political activities and politicians do not court them. This lack of mobilization efforts targeted toward women makes them unlikely to form political engagement patterns (Sherrod 2003; CIRDDOC, 2002). When women who constitute a chunk of the country’s population are not encouraged to participate in politics, democracy will always remain in theory.

The media if well-organized can provide avenues for mobilization and participation (McQuail, 2005) of women in political activities. In the past, the traditional media of radio, television, newspaper etc. are the only political mobilizing propeller. But many scholars (Putnam, 1995; Bakker & Vreese, 2011) have argued that they directly or indirectly blocked popular participation in the political process. They rely predominantly on paid professionals and lack the ability of voters to inject their views, voices, and values into the campaign environment (McQuail, 2005). Again, these paid professionals are also part of the system that relegates women to the background, and thus further decapitate them politically.

The emergence of Internet as a veritable medium of mass communication has brought a great competition to the world of conventional media, like radio, television, newspaper and magazine among others. Scholars have argued that the Internet is a democratizing medium with capacity to affect media use - access to information and interaction; bringing individuals into the political process (Margolis & Resnick, 2000; Delli Carpini, 2000.), since open and participatory nature is compatible with fundamental democratic values (Kuslin, 2000). Of particular interest has been its potentials in increasing participation in politics especially, by women, who are circumscribed by the political culture and practices in Nigeria. Women need authentic communication channels through which to access political information that can provide them with comparative political information, necessary for encouraging equal considerations in politics. It is perhaps, the ability to provide unrestricted freedom of expression in Nigeria as a vital pillar of democracy that has made Internet relevant to politics and civic education (Olagunju, 2009). It becomes necessary therefore, to understand if Internet use has exerted any influence in the political behavior of women in Nigerian.

The study therefore investigated how women in Nigerian universities, particularly those in selected universities in the South-East geo-political zone, used Internet to access political information and have interaction on political issues which people may bring to the net. The essence would be to determine if the political information they received, influenced their interaction and participation in decision making processes in Nigeria.

Background

Politics is the allocation of resources within a nation-state (Nwosu, 2003). It is the determination of how public resources are to be administered within a polity (Olisa, 2000). It means that the various activities of politicians, within a political environment, deal with how the common-will should be harnessed in addressing societal situations (Ezeh, Chukwuma & Enwereuzo, 2015). Political participation therefore is

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