

SOCIAL MEDIA (SM) INFORMATION AND PUBLIC POLICY MAKING: A THEMATIC REVIEW**Dr. Paul Chima¹ and Dr. Helen Emmanuel²**^{1,2}Faculty of Management Sciences, Department of Public Administration, University of Abuja, Fct-Nigeria
E-mail: ¹chimapaul2006@yahoo.com**ABSTRACT**

The impetus for this study originates from an increasing desire to promote representative democracy through a system that routinely links public opinion and public policy. Consequently, social media has been identified in this paper as a cutting-edge tool that can gather data on public policy from organizations, individuals and other societal stakeholders to make informed public policy. Thus, the paper thematically reviews recent literature in five areas, viz, the concepts of social media and public policy, deficits of traditional media in public policy-making, bridging the gaps in the traditional offline media via social media, global critical success stories of social media in policy process and guides for future actions. The salient observation is that social media is an alternative innovation pathway that avoids the limitations of traditional offline media which prevent stakeholders from actively contributing to transformative change. As a result, the paper concludes that incorporating social media information into policymaking is critical, because it has the potential to increase inclusivity in policymaking, foster better citizen-government relations, and support more long-term social change

Keywords: Social media, Information, Adoption, Public policy and Thematic.**Introduction**

One of the most important functions of representative democracy is to provide a mechanism for the regular connection of public opinion and public policy. The preceding is appealing because recognizing potential avenues for individuals to impact their future life, engage in decision-making, and express their views is critical for sustainable growth and development (The Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC] 2012). Research has shown that when public administrators refer to diverse information portfolios, evidence-based policymaking is most successful (Grubmüller; Götsch; & Krieger (2013). Attaining the foregoing feat is a herculean task. However, it has been simplified with the advent of the digital age. In dealing with digital-age phenomena, traditional public policy instruments are becoming ineffective (Oginni and Moitui, 2015). Traditional media is gradually fizzling out, thus, giving way to social media, an evolving digital means of connecting public opinions to the policy process. Social media allows for the inclusion of various spectrums of opinions or choices during policy processes. Thus, the public sector's usage of social media in e-government research [policy process] has piqued the interest of researchers in recent times (Zheng and Zheng, 2013; Khan et al., 2014; Criado et al, 2013). The interest in social media as a vital instrument in the policy process stems from its speedy penetration

in many societies, culminating in opportunities for the public to voice out their concerns and be attracted to political gains. Supporting the foregoing, Noveck, (2010); Coleman & Shane (2012) attest that citizens can use social media platforms to debate government proposals or engage in a participatory policymaking process. Similarly, citizens' extensive use of social media provides an efficient channel for creating and exchanging extensive political content and the rapid organization of citizen-led collective political action (Chadwick, 2009; Soares and Joia 2015). In recent years, social media has served as a speedy and cost-effective tool to garner public opinion regarding policy issues, and it is believed to possess the ability to transform public administration (Linders, 2012; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). Given the significance of social media in the realm of public policymaking, government agencies all over the world collect useful information from citizens about their needs, problems, opinions, and suggestions, which is then used to formulate public policy (new policies as well as changes to existing ones (Bekkers et al, 2013; Charalabidis et al., 2014).

However, in comparison with the private sector, the government's use of social media to facilitate popular engagement in the policy process has left much to be desired or remains an illusion, particularly, in developing countries. This affirms the findings of DALBERG (2013) who enquired

into the internet's impact on African development and discovered that, while public opinion is progressively located on the internet, its use as a policy bargaining tool in Africa is underutilized. It is against this background that this paper contributes to the body of knowledge in five ways. First, by reviewing the concepts of public and social media; unveils the deficits of traditional media in public policy-making; suggests how the existing deficits in traditional media could be bridged through social media to encourage participatory policy-making; reviews global critical success stories and provides guides for future actions.

Conceptual Review Social Media

Social media can be defined as a social structure made up of nodes of individuals or organizations connected by one or more specific interdependencies, such as values, ideas, financial exchange, friendship, kinship, dislike, conflict or trade (Leavey, 2013). In the same vein, it can be seen as a web-based tool that uses user-generated content to connect geographically dispersed people on virtual platforms (Oginni, and Moitui, 2015). Similarly, Merriam-Webster (2004) describes social media as websites and programmes that enable users to establish online communities and exchange information, thoughts, private messages, and other content, such as videos. Social media is a component of the Web 2.0 movement, which is distinguished by user-generated content, online identity formation, and relational networking (Magro.; Ryan.; Sharp; and Ryan, 2009). Social media applications include Facebook and Google microblogging services like Twitter, blogs, wikis, and media sharing sites like YouTube and Flickr.

Deducing from the foregoing, social media could be adjudged a credible tool for policy negotiations, especially, as it is considered a platform that enables ordinary citizens to provide details in the pattern of talented viewpoints, or, in some circumstances, professional verdicts in the policy process. However, among scholars, practitioners and policymakers, the use of social media as an organic game-changer to convey political reform and shape the formation of public policy is still a mirage, (Oginni, and Moitui, 2015). It remains a mirage according to Auer (2011) because social media poses a risk due to the large amount of information that is transmitted, resulting in misinformation, a situation where it is strenuous to

distinguish between information and garbage on social media networks until they gain reputations. This development could lead to the use of social media tools by state actors resulting in contrasting output, called the "dyadic nature of social media" capable of promoting or strengthening democratization or despotism respectively. Merging voice on the deficiencies of social media, Lynch (2011) contends that since no discernible leader is present in course of the bargaining, online activists might get dissatisfied. Using the concept of "networked individualism," to unveil the deficiency of social media, Wellman (2001) emphasizes how new technologies [e.g social media] are displacing the nuts-and-bolts communities away from physically fastened and confined groups toward the social web. However, this argument cannot hold water because the desire to connect geographically separated people to bridge a divided world inspires the creation of social media. Apart from bridging the divided world, social media plays other multifaceted roles (Lampe, LaRose, Steinfield & DeMaag, 2011). These include that policymakers see social media as a means to micro-broadcast policy information to specific stakeholders and crowdsource policy feedback. In this regard, stakeholders can submit ideas and content to policymakers, who will filter the content for relevant information. Given the vital roles that social media plays in the policy process, it becomes necessary to advance critical debates thematically to encourage its usage in the policy process and build on the deficiencies of the traditional offline media.

Public Policy

Thomas Dye provided the most well-known, simple, and concise definition of public policy as "anything a government chooses to do or not do" (Dye, 1972:2). Birkland Thomas (2001) amplifies Dye's definition by positing that the concerned "actions" are the decisions made by the government to act or not act in order to modify or retain established order. Contrastingly, it could be viewed broadly as the decision by the government or private sector as a response to social issues (Lassance, 2020). Similarly, public policy can be seen as an institutionalized proposal to solve pertinent and real-world problems (Rinfret, et al 2018). The above definitions are well suited for this paper because they concentrated on government policies that have an impact and influence every individual of a country or a sub-regional jurisdiction, as opposed to

policies that many organizations and actors make for their members to adhere to. Whereas public policy blueprint prioritizes policy subsystem players, such as professionals, political players and administrators since policies are typically produced by bureaucrats, politicians, and consultants, experts have domineering influence in the process (Howlett et al., 2015; Howlett, 2019). Contemporary movements, however, indicate that citizens may be beneficially involved in the policy design process known as co-creation (Rathore, Maurya & Srivastava, 2021). Co-design entails "enabling or empowering people affected by a policy issue to actively contribute to the development of a solution for it" (Blomkamp, 2018). This is called participatory policy-making, the central theme of this paper. The goal of participatory policy-making is to make it easier for people or groups to be included in the creation of policies through consultative or participatory means to achieve accountability, transparency, and active citizenship. This goal according to this paper can easily be achieved via the generation of policy information through social media. In contrast to most orthodox approaches (such as an evidence-driven, technocratic or utopia consensus perspective), this participatory strategy necessitates an additional step-by-step grasp of technology change and a more acceptable organization stakeholder and commitment (Smedt and Borch, 2021). Incidentally, this paper contributes to the body of knowledge by projecting social media as a tool to enlist citizens' engagement in the policy process.

Research Method

This paper employs a content analysis approach. First, themes were identified to address the objectives of the paper. Secondly, information associated with each theme were sourced from the literature and critically analyzed.

Thematic Issues

Deficits of Traditional Media in Public Policy-Making

According to media scholars, political democracy has been tarnished as a form of government capable of paving the way to the Promised Land due to the persistent weakness of its traditional media [newspaper, radio television etc] (Streets, 2001; Machesney, 1994). A recent study of the African public policy process, for example, identified social distance between politicians and citizens, lack of expertise, politicization of policy execution, and

weak feedback systems as variables that result in the development of unrealistic policies (Imurana, 2014). These occurred because governments or state actors always failed to sway public opinion through effectual media instruments to make successful public policy decisions (Oginni, and Moitui, 2015). The aftermath of this type of scenario is the utilization of a typical conservative policy process, dominated by a few selected cliques (people who have a sketchy understanding of the problematic areas) without the participation of the citizens, who ought to be the primary beneficiaries of the policy outcomes. It has been argued that traditional data collection methods face challenges such as political interests, limited time frame, excess information, institutional characteristics, fiscal limits and a lack of evaluation abilities (Payán & Lewis, 2019). Consistent with the foregoing, Yeung (2018) asserts that traditional surveys, for example, might focus just a small number of supporters from the general public on a particular policy, even though a majority of the public is opposed to the subject matter. Traditional surveys according to Nguyen (2021) may be influenced by the biases of the researchers and respondents. Leading up to the emergence of social media, most policy discourses were held behind closed doors by government officials and expert groups. Following the development of policies, public hearings were convened largely to get permission from relevant parties. (June 2011). The implication therein is that traditional media limits the public to express personal dissatisfaction with government services. The foregoing and other obvious deficits of traditional media make it difficult for public policies to enlist the opinion of the masses in the policy process. Thus, the clarion call for the utilization of social media in revolutionizing popular participation in the policy process.

Gaps Bridging Ability of Social Media

Many government agencies rely on conventional media (radio, television, newspapers etc) prior to the emergence of social media according to Fezell (2017), to establish issues for debate and guide the public in arguing what is believed to be of public concern. However, with the rise of social media (SM) platforms, obtaining citizens' thoughts and views on a public policy or programme has become a lot simple and inexpensive (Edosomwan et al, 2011). While social media has just been recently realized as a novel idea to employ social media in policy process, implementation and appraisal in the

public administrative system (Feezell, 2017), businesses according to Dwivedi et al (2021) have relied on social media in years back to detect customer behaviours, accurate forecasting, demand planning and leveraging data to forecast reliabilities. According to June (2011), social media enables nearly instant access to a greater spectrum of viewpoints and topics than traditional media. In short, people can publicly express themselves by sending a short message through microblogs (Twitter and Me2day) as well as the increasing use of other advanced social technological devices. Social media evolved from a simple form of amusement to a vital component of everyday life for most people. Social media, which has a wider reach than traditional media, is arguably changing the relationship between governments and citizens (Olojo and Allen, 2021). In line with this claim, June (2011) opined that three factors make social media relevant as a bridge builder in policymaking. These are the capacity to link people that use social media and opportune them to exchange viewpoints speedily or within actual time, the potential to reduce user privacy and the ability to make users much more prudent in what they share virtually. Traditional methods of gathering opinions can easily ignore or overlook these attributes. These platforms hasten the emergence of a bottom-up or networked approach to establishing free speech rules, as opposed to a top-down or hierarchical arrangement of traditional media. It calls into question the idea that public policy debate can be moderated solely by the institutional might of the state. Social media is more citizen-focused since it generates information on citizens' requests, their experiences with government and their policymaking preferences during the policy-making process (Margetts, 2013). Utilizing social media in the public policy process ensures better efficient delivery of public services and early warning of possible failures of public services such as transportation, security, healthcare, law enforcement, and social care, as well as cost savings and accuracy improvements (Leavey, 2013). Social networks offer greater information to policymakers (viewpoints, direct communications, conversations, and primary policymaking material) than conventional media, suggesting their usefulness in the policymaking process (Bright., Great Britain and Department for Work and Pensions, 2014). Latest developments in computing and modeling according to Battaglini and Patacchini, (2019) have made it effortless to gather data from social media

networks, thereby making it uncomplicated for these networks to influence policy formation and appraisal. Bekkers and Edwards (2016) also confirm that citizens can now utilize social media to articulate and express policy needs, inspire or persuade the public, strive for other knowledge resources on policy matters, and engage in policy formulation and review. In a contemporary research on the potential of social media platforms for tackling public health concerns like nutrition, it was recognized that Twitter and Facebook are low-cost forums that perhaps could be utilized to motivate the involvement of citizens in the advancement, expansion, and gauging of policy initiatives or patterns in perception dissected employing data mining methods such as neural networks by policymakers to gather data at a fraction of the expense of traditional surveys for evidence-based policymaking (Mendoza-Herrera et al; 2020). It has been recognized that information gleaned from social media forums helps politicians' function better while concentrating more on the preferences of citizens (Margetts, 2013). With social media, people can now express their opinions to politicians and civil servants directly on Facebook and Twitter, rather than relying on the news media for policy information (June 2011). In summary, social media provides a new channel for public opinion expression via which governments use to involve the public in the policy deliberation stage.

Despite the numerous opportunities provided by social media, June (2011) asserts that Governments face some novel challenges. For instance, as governments become more exposed to rapidly changing public opinion, they face increased pressure to engage in hasty and ill-considered populism. In addition, it allows the distribution of messages without the need for screening, editing, or other forms of institutional control. Individuals who exhibit such characteristics have the potential to spread their ideological orientation widely. Besides traditional platforms such as television or print media, which only allow for one-way communication, the internet and social media platforms allow for two-way information flow. Conversely, some detractors contend that instead of enhancing transparency, involvement, and delivery of services, social media is mostly utilized for self-promotion and political marketing. (Picazo-Vela et al., 2016; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). In comparative terms with traditional media, this assertion is entirely true, because, social media is an improved

version of the media tool that enhances the social-political engagement of the masses.

Global Critical Success Stories of Social Media in Public Policy Process

Social media has recorded a huge success across the globe. Statistically, 1.32 billion people worldwide utilize social media for social, political, and economic goals, according to the latest statistics (WIS, cited in Oginni and Moitui, 2015). By simply launching mybarackobama.com, which has nearly 2 million individual profiles, along with 35,000 groups, US President Barack Obama leveraged social media to influence public opinion and win support from the electorate (Oginni and Moitui, 2015). Around 71 million of the 135 million internet users in the Arab World utilize social media, and these platforms are increasingly being used to encourage good governance and Arab social unification (MBRSG, cited in Oginni and Moitui, 2015). To update the current off-road traffic rules, the Finnish government presented a measure to the Finnish parliament in 2010. However, it failed to produce a viable proposal. Thus, The Finnish Ministry of Environment decided to try out crowdsourcing via social media. The goal was to "seek ideas, knowledge, and perspectives from online participants and improve the general public's understanding of the law" (Aitamurto & Landemore, 2016). Even though famous social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have been restricted in China in favour of locally created alternatives (such as Sina Weibo) social media usage has become crucial for online participation, public diplomacy, and social change (Lagerkvist, 2005, Mou et al, 2011). In Canada, the city of Vancouver held online public debates on Facebook to help it develop its transportation policy (June 2011). Tonello (2016) asserts that the usage of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter has altered how information regarding things like court judgments, military intelligence and law enforcement is disseminated. The expansion Arab Spring movements in the Middle East was also linked to the two networks. In an empirical study conducted by Nguyen (2021), on the role of social media in policy formulation improvement in California, many respondents (65 per cent) believed that social media platforms are powerful tools for gauging citizens' opinions via soliciting public opinions and keeping track of their responses, enlightening the general public on the policy's constituents, obtaining responses from as

numerous individuals in the state, carrying out investigation and data collection, and utilizing the sites to get data on how to recast or examine the policy. The preferred platforms by the respondents for policymaking according to (Nguyen, 2021), in the order of ranking, are that 52 per cent mention Facebook as the social media platform with the greatest potential to inform policymaking. Another 35% agreed on Twitter, 20% went for Instagram, 7% indicated LinkedIn, and one each mooted Snapchat, Myspace, and Tiktok. The Department of Finance in the Philippines now receives tips on corruption and tax evasion via Facebook and Twitter (June, 2011). The foregoing instances from different parts of the world portend that social media is capable of bridging gaps associated with offline media sources.

Towards Guides for Future Actions

Given the novel challenges that might becloud social media platforms, the study attempts to raise some suggestions for future actions. In response to the sharp surge in citizen usage of social media, security risks and potential for strategic surprises, governments have devised a variety of online surveillance strategies and devices. Among these, as claimed by Bannister (2005) are devices for monitoring movements and transactions, intercepting conversations, reading and analyzing data. With the aid of some of the tools, the public could view all crowd-sourced input online. On the platform, users could also post images and other attachments and tag their thoughts and comments with keywords so that they could be gathered and seen by other users (Bekkers and Edwards, 2017). Interestingly, social media data scraping apparatuses such as Octoparse, Datahut, Mozenda, Apify, Import.io, and ParseHub, according to (Agrawal, 2019) can be used to forecast trends, monitor what residents are thinking, and efficiently automate social media data gathering to enhance service quality in government, improve policy formulation and evaluation process. According to studies, information is gathered via web scraping techniques, combined with data from other sources, and presented according to user preferences (Dewi, Meiliana & Chandra, 2019). June (2011) suggests that Government should institutionalize social media-based deliberation as a decision-making tool. This will protect government from populist campaigns that social media may otherwise induce. Rather than using social media as a simple gauge of

public opinion, governments should focus on deliberating policy with the public. Using social media during the deliberation stage entails rational debate about the merits of a specific policy. This will encourage citizen-led initiatives that gather data for policymakers and public service delivery organizations. Leavey (2013) recommends that government must send a strong signal to demonstrate that rigorous social data presented to policymakers and delivery organizations will be taken seriously and implemented. Moreso, political and civil servant leaders should encourage the private sector organisation to share data as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes with organizations (government or non-profits) working to achieve social outcomes, such as the government and non-profits. Rathore, Maurya & Srivastava (2021) suggested a novel way of using SM for co-designing public policy. This is called

Social Media Monitoring (SMM). The constant, methodical observation and study of social groups and linkages according to (Bekkers et al., 2013; Fensel et al., 2012) is known as social media monitoring. The government can utilize SMM to observe social media communities that are focused on a certain issue or policy in a passive manner (Loukis et al., 2017; Loukis & Charalabidis, 2015). However, SMM is inadequate for accessing knowledge from SM content. As a result, SMA, developed by Habermas in 1984, might be used to remedy the shortcomings of SMM because it is a better strategy for understanding the impact of numerous stakeholders (Rathore et al., 2017; Aswani et al., 2018; Grover et al.,2019). Using the theory of communicative action SMA could be used to pursue one of the three methods listed in the table below, depending on how the information is used.

1.Using normative knowledge	SMA can be applied rationally to assess the policy situation and intervene.
2. Political-strategic approach	SMA can be utilized to monitor public opinion of a policy and then use that information to manage reputation.
3. Communicative approach	In this scenario, government organizations and the general public work together to define circumstances, issues, and policies in a way that may be utilized to enhance current policies or create new ones using the collective intelligence principle.

Source: Adapted from Rathore A.k; Maurya D & Srivastava A.k (2021).

Many companies have employed SMA to gather consumer feedback on their goods and services to enhance their design (Zhang & Vos, 2014; Rathore & Illavarasan, 2020). But this is often neglected in the public sector organization to co-create public policies (Hedestig et al., 2018; Loukis et al., 2017). Using SMA for policy formulation requires a communicative method that makes use of data to form discourse groups on relevant issues and takes into account the perspectives of the many stakeholders. This is a sharp contrast to the rational approach of ‘Habermas’ Theory of Communication Action’ where SM is primarily used to address service delivery complaints.

Conclusion

Policymaking is critical for the development of any society, especially, when it is supported by commendable initiatives such as social media. This is because social media offers governments alluring opportunities to enhance their policy-making process by avoiding the pursuit of conventional

approaches that may add little or no value to the formulation of policies. This paper adds to the corpus of knowledge by arguing that social media is a cutting-edge technology for gathering public policy data from organizations, people, and other societal stakeholders. A close assessment of topical concerns demonstrates that social media has the ability to assist policymaking. It is an alternative innovation pathway that avoids the limitations of traditional methods which prevent stakeholders from actively contributing to transformative change. With social media, participants can share a variety of experiences leading to a variety of pertinent insights such as relevant knowledge, interpretations, priorities, and perspectives on the policy process. Therefore, the paper concludes that it is critical to incorporate social media innovation into the policy process because it has the potential to increase inclusivity in policymaking, foster better citizen-government relations, and support more long-lasting types of social change.

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