Political Parties and Social Media in Ghana

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Abstract

This study identifies and discusses the specific ways in which political parties in Ghana have deployed social media in advancing their interest, which raises the challenges encountered in the quest to tap the advantages of social media to capture political power. Thus, it argues that even though social media has broad advantages, it has severe challenges that undermines its effectiveness and nullifies any attempt to use it as a substitute to traditional media in Ghana. The study recommends an improved use of traditional media as a means of reaching out to people by political parties, as well as the use of social media only as an "additional communication luxury."

Keywords: political parties; social media; Facebook ; Whatsup ; communication; Internet; smart-phones

Introduction

Political parties have long been considered the pillars of contemporary representative democracy. The most distinctive feature of political parties, when comparing them to any other political interest groups, is that they are the only entity whose primary goal is that of contesting and capturing state power through peaceful means. Therefore, parties have traditionally been considered as the main vehicle for political representation, the main mechanism for the organization of government and the channels for maintaining democratic accountability (Heywood, 2007; Guy and Peters, 2005). Because they occupy such a central place in contemporary democracies, political parties have increasingly become targets of democracy assistance, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Today, a large and ever-growing number of U.S., European, and multilateral assistance programs seek to help parties become effective pro-democratic actors.

The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) for instance was founded specifically to take up the challenge of supporting political parties and assist them in strengthening their democratic roles in society, to better influence national development agendas and to effectively control the executive branch (Meijenfeldt et al., 2015) This support is in recognition of the fact that in emerging democracies, political parties often struggle to take on their conventional roles (ibid).

While the normative framework and mandate upon which actors base their support to strengthen political parties may remain static, the social and political context in which parties operate has significantly changed since their heyday in the middle of the 20th century. The most remarkable changes are the breakthroughs in information technology and social media. Today, the use of social media is not only changing whole sectors of society, it also offers numerous possibilities for modern, meaningful and equal participation and deliberation, as well as chances for new forms of transparency and accountability, in ways and on a scale that was until recently unheard of. Social media driven campaigning political organizations appear more attractive to citizens at the expense of traditional party political activism (Murthy, 2013).

In many parts of the world, people have found alternative ways to participate in politics through online petitioning and action groups rather than through political parties (ibid). This may appear to be a phenomenon that is mainly common in the developed world. However, the rate at which information technology is penetrating countries of the south means that this is a reality that will soon be the norm rather than an exception, also in Africa and for that matter, Ghana. Particularly in the wake of Arab Spring, one can note several commentators and opinion makers suggesting that social media or digital technologies can play enormous role in shaping the activities of political parties as well as help advance democratic participation in countries that believes in the tenets of democracy like Ghana.

The Literature Lacuna

Studies on political parties in Ghana have largely highlighted their evolution and formation; their role in democratic consolidation; their internal democratic practices; mobilization of their support base; inter-party dialogue; funding; and violence. Scholars like Shillington (1992), Jackson (1999), Fobih (2010) and Ayee (2008) have extensively discussed the evolution, formation and administration of political parties in Ghana's Fourth Republic. Ayee (2008) for instance discussed the emergence and development of political parties in Ghana's Fourth Republic with specific emphasis on the rationale for the formation of the New Patriotic Party, its manifesto, structure, constituency and power brokers. In discussing the role of political parties in Ghana's drive towards democratic maturity and consolidation, the works of Abdulai and Crawford (2010), Anebo (1998), McKwartin, (2001), Gyimah-Boadi (2009), Abdallah (2013), Ninsin (2006), Debrah (2007), Boafo-Arthur (2006) comes in handy.

These scholars highlighted the diverse role and peaceful participation of political parties in Ghana's electoral processes in a manner that has helped the nation's Ghana's drive towards democratic maturity and consolidation. They have also discussed the membership drive/mobilization, party structures, weaknesses as well as the challenges of internal democratic practices of the political parties. On inter-party dialogue, Jonah (2005), Ahwoi (2010), Gyimah-Boadi and Debrah (2008), and Asante (2012) have also written on the need to deepen the relations between political parties through dialogue. These scholars have argued out the need for political party dialogue platforms such as the Ghana Political Parties Programme and the Inter-Party Advisory Committee to be strengthened and institutionalized as a way of facilitating dialogue and peaceful interactions between political elites in Ghana.

On political party funding, Gyampo (2015), Nam-Kotati et al. (2011), and Ayee et al (2007) have highlighted the need for public funding of political parties to enable them deliver on their numerous mandate of interest aggregation and articulation, political socialization, training political leaders, etc as well as the challenges and citizens'unpreparedness to be supportive of the call for public funding of political parties. Finally, Danso and Edu-Afful (2012), Danso and Lartey (2012), and Darkwa (2012) have also discussed the malaise and challenge of electoral violence that dents and undermines Ghana's democratic gains and the need to put in place measures to minimize their recurrence.

As can be seen, none of the above scholars have focused on the role of social media in shaping the activities of political parties. According to Internet World Statistics, in 2013, Africa had 16 percent internet penetration and 67 million smartphones in use. In 2014, internet penetration in Africa increased to 26.5 percent. Indeed, there are indications that internet penetration in Africa will reach 50% by 2025 and that the continent will be home to 360 million smartphones.[1] With the surge in the use of social media, other forms of 'democratic' traditions are emerging. In this regard, political parties in Ghana and indeed, many African countries are striving to catch up with the realities of modernity. So, if political parties in developing countries like Ghana would have to remain relevant, the need to adapt to the changing environment occasioned by social media is imperative. Yet, studies on political parties in Ghana have been silent on the effect of social media in shaping the activities of political parties. In filling the lacuna in the literature, this study seeks to thoroughly examine the usage and impact of social media on the activities of political parties in Ghana. Specifically, the study discusses in detail, the concept of social media from a global perspective and narrows it down to Ghana. It identifies and analyzes the effectiveness of the various uses of social media by the political parties and political elites in Ghana and makes recommendations for reform where necessary.

Being a purely qualitative study, data is sourced from secondary works such as library research as well as interviews with the General Secretaries of the four main political parties with representation in Ghana's parliament, namely the National Democratic Congress (NDC), New Patriotic Party (NPP), Peoples' National Convention (PNC) and Convention Peoples' Party (CPP).

Even though there are over twenty-five registered political parties in Ghana, only four of them are seen as serious, active and having the political wherewithal to operate as political parties in Ghana. This explains why they have representation in parliament.

Among the four political parties selected, the NDC and NPP are seen as the two main political parties in Ghana because they have both been in government at least for eight years and have stayed in opposition also for eight years since 1992 when Ghana's fourth effort at constitutional democracy commenced. Given that the competition among the two main parties is keener, they have embraced the use of social media and other innovative means of reaching out to voters quickly, compared to the other two parties. Consequently, the views of the General Secretaries of the two main parties would be given more attention in this research. Generally, interviewing the General Secretaries of the four main political parties is critical because they are the "chief commanders" in prosecuting campaign strategies and ensuring that party ideals are carried across to party supporters and the rank and file.

The Concept of Social Media as Communication Tool

Broadly speaking, social media can be explained in terms of the easy use of internet by anyone to publish and access information, collaborate on a common effort, or build relationships (Murthy, 2013). Social media differ from traditional or industrial media in many ways, including quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy, and permanence (Agichtein et. al., 2008; Graham, 2011). It operates in a dialogic transmission system with many sources to many receivers in contrast to traditional media that operates under a monologist transmission model with one source to many receivers. Social media takes the form of Facebook , twitter, Whatsup , blogs, linkedIn, instagram, etc (Aichner and Jacob, 2015). It can be used to represent the extent to which users reveal their identities; and communicate with others; share, receive, exchange and distribute information. It can also be used to represent the extent to which people can know if other users are accessible including knowing where others are, in the virtual world and/or in the real world, and whether they are available. Again, it can be used to represents the extent to which users can be related to other users as well as the extent to which users can identify the standing and reputation of others (Kietzmann and Kristopher, 2011).

The underlying feature of the defining framework of social media is communication (ibid). Even though internet penetration across the globe differs in terms of rate and intensity[2] the use of social media as a communication mechanism, is a common phenomenon all over the world in modern times because of its greater virality or greater likelihood that users will re-share content received or posted as a way of getting messages extensively circulated within the shortest possible time (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).
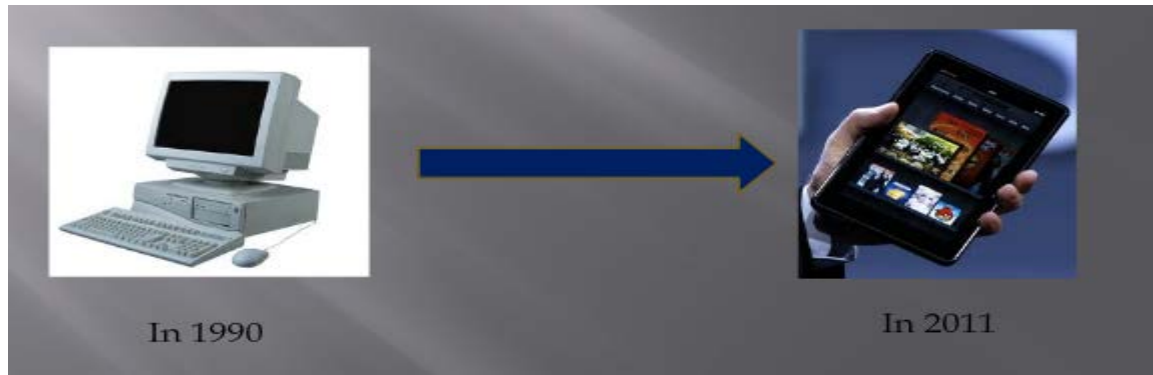
The use of social media as a preferred form of communication is also supported by the huge number or percentage of the citizenry, particularly in the developed world that have access to smart-phones with active 3-G and 4-G mobile connections. Even though the global average of access to smart-phones with access to internet connection is 38%[3], many regions of the world have access to mobile phones with internet connection.[4] Notwithstanding the fact that only 16% of the population in Africa have access to smart-phones with internet connection,[5] the use of social media in many African countries in communication is seen as a creeping and novel practice that cannot be discounted. This is because it facilitates open communication, leading to enhanced information discovery and delivery; captures opinions on issues within few minutes; allows people from all walks of life to discuss ideas, post news, ask questions and share links; provides an opportunity for users to widen business links and socio-political contacts; targets a wide audience, making it a useful and effective outreach tool for political mobilization and other purposes; improves business reputation and client base with minimal use of advertising; and expands political surveys, opinion polls, market research, delivers communications and directs interested people to specific web sites (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010).

According to Moore's law[6], the overall processing powers for computers and digital technologies like smart-phones will double every 18 months.

Source: Moore's Law available at http://www.umsl.edu/~abdcf/Cs4890/link1.html

The picture above above an Osborne Executive Portable Computer, from 1982, and a 2007 Apple iphone. The Executive portable computer weighs 100 times as much. It is nearly 500 times as large by volume, costs approximately 10 times as much (inflation adjusted), and has 1/100th the clock frequency of the smart-phone.[7] But the small smart-phone does effective job than a bulky computer. Hence a local hunter in a remote village in Ghana or a masai warrior in Kenya with a smart-phone now,[8] has better access to information than the US President fifteen years ago (Graham, 2011).

In this regard, the portability, accessibility (by those who can afford) and smartness of smartphones, makes it easier for many people across the globe to use social media for all manner of purposes almost at all times in their daily lives.

In spite of its pre-eminence, the use of social media has been critiqued on several grounds. It can be used as a forum to peddle falsehood and spread information whose trustworthiness may be doubtful. This ends up destroying reputations and damaging hard-won images (Flanigin and Metzger, 2007; Spears et al., 2015). It also opens up the possibility for hackers to commit fraud and launch spam and virus attacks; increases the risk of people falling prey to online scams that seem genuine, resulting in data or identity theft; and potentially results in lost productivity, especially if the citizenry or employees are always busy updating profiles and fidgeting with their social media devices (Flanigin and Metzger, 2007).

Again, access and use of social media is limited particularly in developing countries as a result of limited internet connections and inadequate supply of power (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Zhou et al., 2015). In this regard, where internet connection exists, poverty, ignorance irregular power supply, and lack of sophisticated awareness about the use of social media devices such as smartphones etc undermines the efficiency and effectiveness of social media. Also, it must be pointed out that the use of social media can undermine representative government and bring about "depoliticization" in the sense that people can organize themselves to plan activities directly instead of working through their elected governments and other official representatives. Such people may always feel reluctant to vote during elections, irrespective of how opinionated they may be on social media (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Even though they may not vote, their activities on social media can result in protests and uprisings such as the Arabs springs, Occupy Movements in a manner that can easily destabilize the state and make it ungovernable (Graham, 2011).

Social Media in Ghana

In Ghana, the use of Facebook and Whatsup are the two most dominant mechanisms of social media common, essentially among the elites of society. The leadership of the main political parties over the last decade have touted the uses and importance of social media to the growth and development of political parties in Ghana. In their view, the use of social media makes their respective parties attractive to the youth who are the majority users of social media in Ghana and constitute over sixty percent of the voting population[9], as well as the floating or undecided voters who constitute between five to ten percent of the voting population[10]. "If the youth constitute the majority of Ghana's voting population and are also the dominant users of social media, then it makes sense for us to target them on social media and get them to our side." This was a blunt statement made by the General Secretary of the NDC to underscore the importance of social media to his political party. Again, it has been argued that each of the two main political parties in Ghana, the NDC and NPP has about five million core supporters and that the party that attracts more floating or undecided voters eventually emerges victorious in elections. In this regard, John Boadu, the acting General Secretary of the NPP also observed as follows "…Our core supporters are always with us. We find a lot of undecided voters on social media and seek to draw on their support there…" The political party leaders in Ghana also believe that social media enables political parties to utilize the resources at their disposal more effectively at great speed and to a larger audience at lower cost. It also alters the rigid internal party systems by allowing a bottom-up decision making process.[11] Generally, the political parties in Ghana have used social media for the purposes of:

- Communicating their respective party policies and positions on key socio-economic and governance issues;
- Discussing and soliciting the voice of people on key and current issues;
- Mobilizing support and membership for the parties; and
- Raising funds.

The use of social media for the above purposes by political parties in Ghana is indeed innovative. Prior to social media, political parties in Ghana, like their counterparts elsewhere, relied solely on the traditional communication channels to reach out to their constituents and "would-be-voters/supporters." These channels include campaign rallies, community broadcasts with information vans, house-to-house/door-to-door campaigns with the help of party foot-soldiers, radio and television advertisement and announcements and recently, through presidential debates and town hall meetings (Asante, 2006).

Analyzing Political Party Use of Social Media in Ghana

This next section analyzes how political parties in Ghana have used social media in advancing their interest as follows:

- *Communicating Party Policies and Positions on Key Issues-* The four General Secretaries interviewed underscored the usefulness and importance of social media such as Facebook and Whatsup platforms as means of communicating their respective party policies and positions on key socio-economic and political issues. Indeed, "social media presents an advocacy platform for the communication of party policies with the view to winning support for such policies." (Asiedu-Nketiah, 2016). Prior to social media, some political parties experienced severe challenges communicating their policies to the public through the traditional media, particularly the print and electronic ones. This was due to several factors such as frigid relations between the political parties and the traditional media outlets or the fact that some parties were perceived as too small and not capable of winning an election, out-dated, and having nothing to offer Ghanaians. "The NDC was for instance not properly accepted in the traditional media because of its revolutionary attack on media freedom by its antecedent regime of the Provisional National Defense Council" (ibid). Consequently, the traditional media, prior to social media, had a very lukewarm attitude to publishing and communicating NDC policies to the Ghanaian citizenry. The NDC therefore took to social media as a platform to communicate party policies, manifestoes and achievements to the people (ibid). For instance, the NDC's Green Book that catalogues the achievements of President John Mahama from 2012-2016 is published on Facebook and it continues to receive "likes" (show of approval), comments and suggestions from people.[12]

  Given the vibrant use of social media as a platform for the communication of party policies, the traditional media now uses it as one of its sources for news reportage (Boadu, 2016). In corroborating this point, the General Secretary of the NDC noted that "even though they may not report or publish our party policies and manifestos, submitted to them via the traditional means, they are forced to pick and carryout stories for us on our policies from social media as a result of the interests it generates on Facebook or Whatsup ."

  To show the seriousness attached to social media by political parties, they have designated people whose mandate is to post party policies, manifestoes and positions on key socio-economic and governance issues on Facebook pages. Such individuals designated by the parties are charged with the responsibility of constantly monitoring how people "like" or express support for the posts on Facebook.

The appointed individuals also have the mandate to explain what they post in detail for the education of those who read, and respond to queries and criticisms raised by the public on their post. For instance the ruling NDC has its 2012 manifesto and other party policies and positions posted on Facebook and has assigned Dela Coffie, an official of the party to constantly monitor comments on the documents posted, provide feedback on comments to the party, respond to queries, defend the position of the party and to educate those who read about the materials posted. Dela Coffie is also charged with the task of serializing contents of party policies and manifesto and communicating them to the Facebook public. Again, the same official is expected to puncture holes in the policies of other political parties and "do all he can to make the opposition look less credible on Facebook and in the eyes of the public". [13] In a follow up interview with Dela Coffie, he observed as follows: "This strategy works in pitching our party above the opposition and in improving our electoral fortunes among young people who really matter in elections."

Also, the political parties, especially the two main parties, have several Whatsup platforms that they use for the purposes discussed above. An official of the party is tasked to create this platform and add as many telephone numbers as possible. These essentially are telephone numbers of core party supporters, people regarded as floating or undecided voters and sometimes, people who completely do not belong to the political party that created the platform. In Ghana, one of the Whatsup platforms of the NPP is managed by Francis Ejaaku Donkoh, a former Central Regional Youth Organizer of the party. The list of persons on this platform encapsulates "virtually everybody who matters in the party, academics, business people, floating voters and even some members of the ruling NDC." [14] This platform is also useful in discussing pertinent issues affecting the New Patriotic Party and the nation as a whole. In a follow-up interview with Francis Ejaaku Donkoh, he noted that "our Whatsup platform is one powerful tool aimed at informing and educating people about our party policies as well as issues affecting our party and Ghana and keeping them on the front burner of political discourse."

Communicating party policies and positions on key issues to people via social media is however fraught with several setbacks. Many party supporters and undecided voters have derogatory but sometimes deserving perception about party information posted on social media. Over the years, social media has also served as platform for internet fraud, scams, defamation of character, publication of lies, circulation of doctored tape recordings to malign people as well as pornographic materials (Flanigin and Metzger, 2007; Spears et al., 2015). In May 2015, there was a publication of a purported resignation letter issued and signed by Kwabena Agyapong, the General Secretary of the NPP on social media.[15] Without authenticating this, the traditional media also published the story in their outlets only for the General Secretary to deny knowledge about what had gone viral. [16] Again on 20th March, 2016, the Bureau of National Investigation (BNI) in Ghana arrested three South African former police officers in the Central Region for allegedly engaging in acts that threatens the country's security.

The three, 54-year-old Major Retired Ahmed Shaik Hazis, 39-year–old Warrant Officer Retired Denver Dwayhe Naidu and 45-year-old Captain Retired Mlungiseleli Jokani, were picked up at the El Capitano Hotel in Agona Duakwa in the Central Region. They were engaged in training of some fifteen young men in various military drills, including unarmed combat, weapon handling, VIP protection techniques and rapid response maneuvers. [17]It was later reported on Facebook that the Minister of Interior, Prosper Bani had in an interview with a radio station in Johannesburg, South Africa indicated that the three arrested South Africans were no security threat to Ghana and must be released.[18] The traditional media circulated this publication extensively. However, it turned out that it was a hoax and that Minister had not granted any such interview. Unfortunately, the publication of lies and deception that even have the tendency to cause fear and panic would continue to plague Ghana for quite a long time. This is because even though there are mechanisms to trace and investigate the sources that spew lies on social media, they are described as a waste of time and not effectively utilized. [19]

In this regard, publishing important documents and information such as party policies and positions on social media, is seen by many, especially undecided voters as condescending, sheer propaganda and political gossips that must be discounted.[20] Whereas hard copy documents are deemed acceptable and credible, the same information and documents published on social media are sometimes received with doubt and serious credibility issues are raised to reject them. [21] Consequently, instead of such publications on social media generating constructive feedbacks from supporters and non-supporters, they sometimes result in insults, unhealthy arguments, less constructive criticisms and dangerous allegations by "faceless people" (people who choose to hide their names and identities on Facebook). [22]

Whereas the traditional media can offer a platform for rejoinders to be issued to repair damage caused as a result of the publication of baseless allegations on social media, such an opportunity does not exist when "faceless people" use social media to peddle falsehood and unsubstantiated allegations which usually becomes viral (Asiedu-Nketiah, 2016). It must also be added that the publication of false news from social media by the traditional media without due diligence and cross-checking of facts, could gradually erode the latter's respect and social standing.

Another contending challenge in the use of social media is that some party supporters and undecided voters see their inclusion on Whatsup platforms as unnecessary invasion of their privacy. Hence they either remain silent without commenting on issues tabled for discussion or exit silently from the platform. According to the General Secretary of the PNC, "communicating party positions and policy prescriptions on social media is expected to educate people and elicit positive feedback.

The General Secretary of the NDC however observed that "If political parties cannot get positive feedback from people on what they post on social media, then the use of social media is certainly of minimal benefit to them in Ghana." In this regard, the acting General Secretary of the NPP also added that "we may not abandon social media, but we would not also place all our hopes on it as a medium of communication."

- *Discussing and Soliciting Voice and Opinion on Key Topical Issues Affecting the State* – Social media is also used by political parties to discuss and solicit voice or opinion on key issues affecting the nation. Indeed, social media allows millions of political party supporters and the undecided voters to voice their views on all critical national issues under discussion. This opportunity is lost to such people who cannot all contribute to radio discussions through their "phone-in sessions". The massive feedback to issues generated from social media is what governments use to formulate and perfect their policies (Asiedu-Nketiah, 2016; Boadu, 2016). Social media therefore presents a swift mechanism that facilitates the solicitation of opinion of both party supporters and undecided voters on topical issues of national concern.

One key issue that was raised on both Facebook and Whatsup platforms with a view to soliciting quick opinion and voice was on the status of Ghana's voters' register prior to the 2016 General Elections. The integrity and credibility of Ghana's voters' register was questioned by various groups of people and stakeholders in Ghana's electoral processes. Two main reasons were articulated. First, that the register was bloated with names of minors and second, that the register had names of non-Ghanaians as registered voters. The NPP further conducted an audit of the register and alleged that the register in some parts of the Volta Region of Ghana, the stronghold of the NDC, was bloated with names of aliens who do not qualify to be registered. They accordingly demanded a new voters' register since in their view, no amount of cleaning and purging can restore the credibility of the register. In a sharp response, the NDC dismissed the call for a new voters' register, arguing that even though there may be problems with the register, the solution lies in cleaning and purging it.

The various political parties sought to strengthen their respective positions by soliciting the views of their supporters via social media. The CPP and PNC never had united or respective positions on the issue at stake and were therefore seen as appendages of the two main political parties in the debate.[23] However, the issue was seriously debated and various views canvassed on the Facebook pages and Whatsup platforms of the ruling NDC and opposition NPP. According to the acting General Secretary of the NPP, the party got more points to support its call for a new voters' register from the various Facebook postings of its supporters. The General Secretary of the NDC also noted that the ruling party had more ammunition to destroy the call for fresh voters' register both from its Facebook page and Whatsup platforms.

It must however be noted that often times, the views solicited on social media tend to be overly partisan and emotional sentiments sometimes not backed by logic and critical thinking. Even though occasionally, the views of the very discerning undecided voters come through, such laudable views are often times dwarfed by the emotionally charged and partisan ones which may not necessarily be in the enlightened interest of Ghana.[24] In the view of acting General Secretary of the NPP, "excessive politicization and polarization in Ghana's body politic is typically reflected on social media in a manner that undermines the expression of very reasoned and properly thought-through views in support for or in opposing key topical issues under discussing." For instance, in expressing their views on whether Ghana should opt for a new voters' register or maintain the existing one, party supporters only sought to re-echo their respective party positions, interlacing their points with insults, without advancing cogent reasons. This tends to degenerate into unhealthy war of words and verbal exchanges that creates tension, rancor, acrimony, and polarizes the nation.

- *Mobilizing Support and Membership for the Parties* - Some political parties, especially the minor ones like the CPP and PNC have used their Facebook pages not only as interactive forum but also as a means of registering their executives and supporters nation-wide. The core supporters of the two parties above are largely the aged and old guards who held different positions and played key roles in supporting these parties in time past (Debrah, 2007; Asante, 2006). In their quest to reinvigorate themselves and appeal to the youth, the two parties have created databases on Facebook that allows them to appeal to, and register young people as members. On the other hand, both the NDC and NDC have not resorted to this strategy because they both have the youth on their side and have information or conservative estimates of the total number of their respective core supporters (Asante, 2006). From the various interviews conducted, none of the four parliamentary parties has used Whatsup platforms as a means of registering their respective supporters.

It is however instructive to note that young people are normally used by political parties in Ghana as voting-machines (Gyampo, 2012). Therefore any attempt to mobilize them on Facebook is geared towards getting them to play active role in campaigning and voting for political parties (Asante, 2006). Over the years, they have played this role in their capacity as foot-soldiers campaigning in rural communities, selling party paraphernalia to raise funds and actually showing up in their numbers at the various polling centers to vote for their respective political parties (ibid). On the contrary, the use of social media as a mobilization tool by the political parties does not necessarily translate into voting among the youth as noted by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010). Young people on social media may be articulate and vociferous in support of their parties but most of them do not simply vote in elections. [25]

People who consume more news on social media have a greater probability of being civically and politically engaged across a variety of measures (Wihbey, 2015). In an era when the public's time and attention is increasingly directed toward platforms such as Facebook and Whatsup s, scholars have been seeking to evaluate the still-emerging relationship between social media use and politics. The Obama presidential campaigns in 2008 and 2012 and the Arab Spring in 2011 catalyzed interest in networked digital connectivity and political action. Popular discourse has focused on the use of social media by the Obama campaigns. "While these campaigns may have revolutionized aspects of election campaigning online, such as gathering donations, there is little evidence that the social media aspects of the campaigns were successful in changing people's levels of participation. In other words, the greater use of social media did not affect people's likelihood of voting or participating in the campaign." (Boulianne, 2015).

The observation of Boulianne (2015) is not peculiar to America. In Ghana too, the active role of young people on social media seems to confer enough power of political participation on them to the extent that some of them see voting as a waste of their time.[26] Also, most of the mobilized party supporters on social media are "faceless people who do not really care about voting."[27] Even though the youth constitute about 60% of Ghana's voting population, only a little over 12% of them are active on social media and in the words of the General Secretary of the NDC, "our own investigations reveal that only about 3% actually exercise their franchise during elections."[28] In this regard, it is an indubitable reality that the use of social media in mobilizing support for political parties in Ghana has failed to achieve its purpose. But of course this phenomenon may not be peculiar to Ghana. As aptly argued by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), it may also be common among developed democracies where social media play more sophisticated role in politics.

- *Fund Raising* – All the political parties have used social media to raise funds for their activities. The CPP for instance has instituted a mechanism for a monthly deduction of one cedi from the smart-phone credit of its registered members. Similarly the other parties, particularly the NDC and NPP periodically launch appeals for funds on their Facebook pages and Whatsup platforms. Indeed, in the lead up to the 2008 and 2012 General Elections, the NPP injected fresh impetus into the political landscape of the country with the introduction of an innovative text messaging system of fundraising. The move was one of several modern social campaign strategies unleashed into the nation's electoral campaign activities. The strategy presented every supporter of the party, an opportunity to identify and share the goals, aspirations and eventual electoral victory of the NPP in Ghana's electoral polls.

By simply texting "NPP" to the code 1677 with one's smart-phone to all mobile-phone networks in Ghana, one cedi was deducted from supporters. Through constant interactions and reminders on Facebook , party supporters were encouraged to keep texting as the more they sent the texts, the more they consolidated the party's match to victory.[29] Similarly, in the lead up to the 2008 and 2012 General Elections, the NDC, through its Facebook and Whatsup outlets appealed and raised some funds from its supporters and other well-wishers including those in the business community. According to the General Secretaries interviewed, all the parties have commenced fund raising activities on social media in the lead up to the 2016 General Elections. The NDC for instance is on the verge of launching a page on its Facebook which when "liked" automatically deducts one cedi from the mobile-phone credit of the person who wants to contribute to the party's campaign finance (Asiedu-Nketiah, 2016).

Raising funds on social media is however problematic in a developing country like Ghana where the idea of public funding of political parties is yet to be fully accepted and appreciated (Gyampo, 2015). The response rate to the text messages as a means of raising funds has generally been low and abysmal. In the CPP for instance, the idea of raising funds through text messages was abandoned few months after its introduction as party supporters never showed much interest in contributing to help advance the cause of the party.[30] Similarly, the NPP's call on its supporters to contribute to funding the party through the same means has not yielded much result. In the lead up to both the 2008 and 2012 General Elections, funds raised from text messages could not account for even one percent of the cost incurred by the party.[31] According to the NDC General Secretary, funds raised by the party in the lead up to elections have been woefully inadequate. In his view "these have mostly taken the form of irredeemable pledges and promises from faceless people."[32] So, as politicians in Ghana gradually embrace the use of social media as a fund raising mechanism, they may take lessons from what happened in the US in the lead up to the 2008 elections when Barack Obama raised USD 3.2 million from about 15 social media networks including Facebook . [33]

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Even though the advantages in the use of social media in politics have been hyped, Ghanaian politicians are yet to fully benefit from such laudable novelties. As can be deduced from the study only, the NDC and NPP have been able to put social media to greater use. The PNC and CPP have not been very active on social media probably as a result of the aged nature of its core supporters. Generally, it can be argued that social media is new to Ghanaians and not accessible to many of them due to poverty, ignorance and illiteracy.

In spite of its potential advantages, there are latent dangers that must not elude politicians and policy makers in their attempt to put the new platform to full use. No political party anywhere in the world can completely substitute the traditional media with social media. Given the advantages and challenges associated with the use of social media as revealed in this study, political parties in Ghana may hasten slowly in conducting their activities on social media. They may fully concentrate on, and improve the traditional media as a means of reaching out to people, while they wait patiently and work gradually towards the full evolution of social media in Ghana. Until the dangers and challenges associated with social media are fully addressed, political may only use the new media as an "additional communication luxury", and not a substitute to the traditional media.

Notes

1. See more details at http://www.internetworldstats.com/

2. www.wearesocial.org puts the regional statistics of internet penetration across the globe as of January 2016 as   follows: North America, 88%; Central America, 43%; South America, 56%; West Europe, 81%; Middle East, 36%; Africa, 26%; East Europe, 58%; Central Asia, 38%; South Asia, 19%; East Asia, 51%; South-East Asia, 33%; and Oceania, 69%

3. See www.wearesocial.org for more details

4. Ibid

5. Ibid

6. Read details of Moore's law at http://www.umsl.edu/~abdcf/Cs4890/link1.html

7. Ibid

8. Ibid

9. Interview with Johnson Asiedu Nketiah, General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 4th March 2016.

10. Interview with John Boadu, acting General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 10th March 2016

11. Interviews with Nii Armah Akonfrah, General Secretary of the Convention Peoples' Party and Atik Mohammed, General Secretary of the Peoples' National Convention in Accra on 12th March 2016.

12. See details at https://www.Facebook .com/FriendsOfPresidentJohnDramaniMahama/

13. Interview with Johnson Asiedu Nketiah, General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 4th March 2016

14. Interview with John Boadu, acting General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 10th March 2016

15. See details at https://www.Facebook .com/search/top/?q=kwabena%20agyapong%20resigns

16. See more details at http://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/43682-i-have-not-resigned-kwabena-agyapong.html

17. See details at http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Terror-alert-BNI-picks-up-3-South-African-nationals-425108

18. See details at https://www.Facebook .com/anthony.karbo?fref=ts

19. In my interviews with the party secretaries, they all made this point tacitly

20. Ibid

21. Ibid

22. Interview with Johnson Asiedu Nketiah, General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 4th March 2016

23. Interviews with Nii Armah Akonfrah, General Secretary of the Convention Peoples' Party and Atik Mohammed, General Secretary of the Peoples' National Convention in Accra on 12th March 2016.

24. Ibid

25. Interview with Johnson Asiedu Nketiah, General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 4th March 2016.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid

28. Ibid

29. For more details, see: https://www.modernghana.com/news/166213/1/npp-fundraising-goes-hi-tech-party-to-raise-funds-.html

30. Interviews with Nii Armah Akonfrah, General Secretary of the Convention Peoples' Party in Accra on 12th March 2016.

31. Interview with John Boadu, acting General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 10th March 2016.

32. Interview with Johnson Asiedu Nketiah, General Secretary of the National Democratic Congress in Accra on 4th March 2016

33. See more details at http://www.dragonflyeffect.com/blog/dragonfly-in-action/case-studies/the-obama-campaign/

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