



Analysis of Government Political Communication and Democratic Sustainability in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: Political communication is crucial for democratic sustainability, yet Nigeria's democratic journey is marred by anti-democratic tendencies, opaque governance, and exclusionary practices. Despite its significance, the role of political communication in shaping Nigeria's democracy remains under-explored, particularly in the context of digital media and evolving citizen engagement.

Objective: This study examined the fragmented nature of political communication in Nigeria, investigated its role in sustaining democracy, promoting transparency, and fostering civic engagement, especially when used as a tool for exclusion and propaganda.

Method: A multi-qualitative approach was employed, combining a systematic review of related literature with an analysis of selected case studies that met specific criteria, focusing on political communication in Nigeria.

Results: The study reveals that digital platforms are transformative but pose risks when over-relied upon; Nigerian institutions are fragile and vulnerable to interference; and INEC's communication reforms show promise but face credibility gaps.

Conclusion: Effective political communication is a critical determinant of Nigeria's democratic growth. Despite over two decades of civilian rule, the quality and ethics of communication processes continue to shape the sustainability of its democracy.

Unique Contribution: This study highlights indigenous moral frameworks as a means to restore trust and accountability in state-citizen communication, and provides evidence that social media's impact on youth engagement is complex, with risks of disinformation undermining democratic consolidation.

Key Recommendations: INEC should institutionalize inclusive communication frameworks, strengthen media independence, and expand digital engagement channels. Politicians must commit to codes of conduct, and digital literacy should be prioritized to reduce disinformation

Keywords: Political communication, democracy, sustainability, Nigeria, media, participation.



INTRODUCTION

The efficacy of democratic governance in Nigeria has been a subject of intense debate, with the country's democratic journey marked by periods of turbulence and stagnation. A critical factor influencing this trajectory is the nature of political communication, which plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, fostering civic engagement, and ensuring accountability. However, Nigeria's democratic landscape is characterised by anti-democratic tendencies, opaque governance, and exclusionary practices that undermine the potential of political communication to drive sustainable development. Omotoso (2021) concurs that unethical communication practices have fuelled violence, alienation, and distrust, weakening the credibility of democratic governance.

The media, traditionally regarded as the “fourth estate,” is expected to act as watchdog, agenda-setter, and a platform for public deliberation. Yet, Abegunde and Fajimola (2018) highlight contradictions in Nigeria's media landscape: ownership structures, commercialization, and political capture compromise independence. Ijeh (2022) adds that poor journalistic standards and state interference further weaken the press. Instead of empowering citizens with impartial information, media outlets often reproduce propaganda, sensationalism, and ethnic bias, limiting their role in democratic consolidation.

Information and communication technology (ICT) has expanded the scope of political communication, enabling citizens to participate beyond traditional boundaries. Ogbe and Ojie (2020) emphasize that ICT-driven political education can counter authoritarian legacies and equip citizens to demand accountability. Social media platforms such as X-Platform (Twitter), Facebook, and WhatsApp have transformed political mobilization, narrative framing, and real-time communication. Ugochukwu (2021) shows how APC and PDP leveraged these platforms during the 2015 and 2019 elections. However, misinformation and manipulation remain pervasive. The #EndSARS protests of 2020 revealed both the power and risks of digital activism. Online mobilization surpassed institutional failures, amplifying citizen voices and diaspora support, but also provoked state repression. Inobemhe (2023) found that social media boosts youth awareness and community engagement, though Uwa and Ronke (2023) caution that it also spreads hate speech and propaganda. Emerging technologies intensify these risks. Okolo (2024) warns that AI-driven disinformation, including deepfakes and fabricated news, poses unprecedented threats to electoral integrity and trust in institutions. These challenges underscore the urgency of fact-checking, digital literacy, and regulatory frameworks to safeguard Nigeria's fragile democracy. Nevertheless, Akubor, (2020), Alawode, & Adesanya, (2018), Arowolo, (2017), Igwe, (2024) also conducted empirical studies on the subject matter but failed to address government communication, they focused on political advertising, Media Ownership and framing theory indication a huge gap on government polical communication.

Despite over two decades of civilian rule, Nigeria's democracy remains fragile. Political communication through traditional media, digital platforms, and state agencies is vital but contested. Accordingly, voter turnout illustrates this gap, despite massive youth mobilization through online, only 34.7% in 2019 and 29% in 2023 was recorded by INEC, (INEC, 2023). Fake news, ethnic polarization, and distrust in INEC technologies further undermine credibility



(Premium Times, 2023; BBC, 2023). Structural deficits persist: women hold just 4.4% of parliamentary seats (UN Women, 2023), while press freedom is restricted, with Nigeria ranked 112th globally (Reporters Without Borders, 2023).

Altogether, these dynamics show that while political communication is indispensable for participation, accountability, and civic empowerment, in Nigeria it remains fragmented, manipulative, and exclusionary. Democratic sustainability depends on restructuring communication to build trust, inclusivity, and genuine citizen engagement, while mitigating disinformation, propaganda, and exclusionary practices.

Despite the significance of political communication in such democratic settings, there is a dearth of research on its role in Nigeria's democratic sustainability, particularly in the context of digital media and evolving citizen engagement. The few existing studies have focused on the role of traditional media, neglecting the transformative impact of digital platforms on political communication. This study seeks to bridge this knowledge gap by examining the fragmented nature of political communication in Nigeria, investigating its role in sustaining democracy, promoting transparency, and fostering civic engagement, especially when used as a tool for exclusion and propaganda. The Nigerian context presents a unique case study, with a diverse population, a history of military rule, and a vibrant civil society that continues to push for democratic reforms. The country's experience with democracy offers valuable insights into the complexities of political communication in developing democracies, making this study a timely contribution to the discourse on democratic sustainability in Nigeria and beyond.

OBJECTIVES

- i. The paper sought to identify the fragmented nature of the political communication in Nigeria
- ii. To ascertain the role and effectiveness of political communication in sustaining Nigeria's democracy
- iii. To examine the challenges that made political communication to be used as an instrument of exclusionary and propaganda.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of Political Communication in Nigeria

Political communication is the exchange of information among political actors, institutions, media, and citizens. McNair (2018) defines it as all politically motivated communication, whether from governments, political parties, civil society, or individuals. It extends beyond campaigns to governance, policy debates, crisis management, and mobilisation. Traditionally expressed through town halls, newspapers, and radio, it now includes television, digital platforms, and social media, reflecting its growing influence on democratic processes. In this study, political communication aligns with McNair's view but also includes persuasive and manipulative forms such as deepfakes and fabricated news, often serving elite interests.

The evolution of political communication mirrors broader technological and societal changes. Norris and Odugbemi (2019) note the shift from elite-controlled narratives to interactive, citizen-driven strategies. In Nigeria, this was evident in the 2015 elections, where platforms like Twitter



and Facebook mobilised young voters (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2020). Political communication now operates in a complex environment where elites, media, and citizens co-create narratives.

Several theories illuminate its dynamics. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) argues media influence what people think about, evident in Nigerian campaigns framing corruption or insecurity. Framing theory (Bateson, Goffman) shows how issue presentation shapes interpretation; electoral reforms framed as “progress” or “manipulation” affect citizen responses and voter turnout. Habermas’ (1989) public sphere highlights inclusive dialogue, though Nigeria’s digital sphere also fosters misinformation and hate speech (Uwalaka, 2021). Lazarsfeld’s (1972) two-step-flow theory remains relevant, as opinion leaders, religious figures, ethnic elites, influencers shape discourse.

Political communication is vital in emerging democracies. Adebayo and Ojo (2020) stress its role in building trust, transparency, and inclusivity. Yet challenges persist: misinformation, low media literacy, and politicisation of institutions undermine democratic deepening (Olayinka, 2023). The 2023 elections revealed disinformation polarising voters along ethnic and religious lines. Thus, while political communication offers opportunities for participation and accountability, it also carries risks. Strengthening Nigeria’s democracy requires reforms and deliberate efforts to foster inclusive, transparent, and responsible communication practices.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Political communication in Nigeria has evolved alongside its turbulent democratic history. Since independence in 1960, communication between elites and citizens has been shaped by colonial legacies, ethnic pluralism, and authoritarian regimes. During military rule (1966–1999), state-controlled media served mainly as propaganda tools. The return to democracy in 1999 opened new spaces for participation, but communication remained largely top-down. Weak institutions, electoral malpractice, and corruption have hindered consolidation. Omotoso (2021) notes deep distrust between government and citizens, reflected in declining voter turnout from 69% in 2003 to 34.7% in 2019 and 29% in 2023 (INEC, 2023). Ogbe and Ojie (2020) argue that credible communication fostering trust and inclusiveness is central to democratic sustainability.

Media, technology, and political communication are closely linked. While the media is constitutionally a democratic watchdog, Abegunde and Fajimola (2018) highlight how ownership and commercialization compromise independence. Digital technology has transformed discourse, with mobile phones and internet access creating new spaces beyond elite control. Social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp became key tools during the 2015 and 2019 elections (Ugochukwu, 2021), though they also amplified misinformation and hate speech (Uwa & Ronke, 2023). Electoral management innovations such as BVAS and IReV in 2023 aimed to improve transparency but instead triggered controversies and distrust (BBC, 2023).

Electoral communication remains a major arena of democratic participation. Campaigns, debates, and advertising should inform citizens but often reinforce ethnic appeals, vote buying, and populism (Ijeh, 2022). Yet citizen-led initiatives show promise. The 2020 #EndSARS protests demonstrated the power of grassroots communication, with Twitter enabling



coordination, fundraising, and diaspora support (Bello et al., 2023). Inobemhe (2023) found social media exposure boosted youth awareness, contributing to 84% of new voter registrations in 2023 among those aged 18–34.

Despite these prospects, challenges persist. Over 30% of Nigerians encountered fake news during the 2023 elections (Abiodun, 2024). Press freedom remains fragile, with Nigeria ranked 112th globally in 2023. Gender exclusion is stark: women, though 51% of the population, held only 4.4% of parliamentary seats (UN Women, 2023). Looking forward, Okolo (2024) warns of AI-driven disinformation risks. Addressing these requires stronger fact-checking, digital literacy, media independence, and inclusive communication strategies. Harnessing political communication effectively could provide a foundation for Nigeria's democratic sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

The paper adopted a multi-qualitative method by systematic reviewing related literature and conducting analysis of selected case studies. For the systematic review, a step-by-step process of inclusion and exclusion criteria was used in selecting relevant studies across multiple databases. Only studies that met the initial criteria of inclusion were selected and data were analysed in a transparent, replicable manner. Again, the case study selection was based on the ability of the case to have same focus as the current study. Generally, the two qualitative methods can either take the form of interviewing people around the topic of this study, or it might also involve the analysis of written documents on specific subject matter. Thus, political communication in Nigeria context have revolved around major issues of political campaigns during 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections, the use and misuse of digital platforms, EndSARS movement, institutional credibility and voter education frameworks, media ownership and gatekeeping among others. This why the multi-qualitative approaches adopted was to ensure precision and avoids bias unlike a simple narrative review. It also allows deep contextual understanding (through case studies) and it strengthens the credibility of the study especially the conclusions because the selection and analysis are transparent.

Political Communication and Social Media Revolution Case Study

Political communication and social media shaped Nigeria's 2015 general election, shifting the battleground online. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and WhatsApp became central to campaign strategies and citizen discourse. Agreeing with the above, Akubor (2020) observes that social media has amplified agenda-setting, mobilisation, and issue framing beyond conventional media as it has turned everyday users into message carriers.

Framing and propaganda around insecurity, corruption, and identity crises dominated the election, presenting it as a referendum on corruption and security (Okolie et al., 2021). Campaigns foregrounded ethno-regional and religious identities—such as Islamisation fears or northern victimhood while humour, name-calling, and emotional appeals boosted engagement and entrenched partisanship (Alawode & Adesanya, 2018). Misinformation also played a role, notably the “Buhari school-certificate” saga, which questioned eligibility and competence. Though later dismissed, it exemplified strategic disinformation. WhatsApp broadcasts carried morality claims portraying corruption and anti-faith narratives. Ofori-Parku & Moscato (2018)



highlight how digital activism around Boko Haram and the Chibok kidnappings shaped perceptions of incompetence and urgency, while ethno-religious fear appeals heightened group divisions (Okolie et al., 2021).

EndSARS 2020 Case Study

The EndSARS protests of October 2020 showed how citizen-led, networked communication scaled from online outrage to coordinated street action. Within ten days, nearly 48 million EndSARS-related tweets were recorded (Nendo/Brandwatch, 2020). Reports indicated 86% of activities were peaceful, though some faced excessive force (ACLED, 2021). On 20 October, shootings at Lekki Gate and Alausa left at least 12 dead, with Amnesty International reporting 56 deaths nationwide (2020).

Digital platforms served as mobilisation tools and infrastructures of transparency. The Feminist Coalition (FEMCO) used dashboards and crypto rails to manage and disclose funds, including ₦20.1m for medical aid, ₦15.7m for legal support, ₦45.7m for victims, and ₦2m for memorials (FEMCO, 2021). Uwalaka (2023) notes that X coordinated logistics while WhatsApp and Facebook enabled hyperlocal organising and rapid diffusion of protest frames. Citizen livestreams, such as DJ Switch's broadcast to 150,000 viewers, pressured officials and celebrities to respond.

EndSARS communication practices—open ledgers, crowdsourced defense, live documentation, and hashtag-driven agenda-setting—translated into accountability channels that persisted beyond the protests. Research links EndSARS' digital repertoires to subsequent youth engagement in elections and advocacy for police reform (ACLED, 2021). Akerele-Popoola (2022) concludes that EndSARS transformed social media from a broadcast tool into participatory accountability infrastructure, documenting abuses, funding relief, and demanding answers from authorities

INEC Communication Pattern Case Study: Following complaints of low voter awareness, INEC established strategic communication and voter education frameworks in 2011. Its 2012–2016 Strategic Plan acknowledged resource limits and created the Inter-Agency Committee on Voter Education and Publicity (NICVEP) in 2014, leveraging partnerships with agencies, media, and civil society. Ahead of the 2023 elections, INEC reviewed its Voter Education Manual and, in 2021, collaborated with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to integrate social media, targeting women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other marginalised groups. INEC also formalised internal communication, launching a revised policy in 2019 and establishing a 24/7 Citizen Contact Centre (ICCC) to engage voters, monitor media, and counter misinformation.

By 2023, INEC expanded communication to include crisis response, transparency, and proactive media engagement. An Election Crisis Communication Team was formed in 2022 to tackle misinformation, supported by groups like the Centre for Democracy and Development. Observer communication was central, with a record 146,913 accredited observers the largest in Nigeria's history. Despite these advances, INEC faced challenges from fake news, especially around its Result Viewing Portal (IReV) and Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). Though INEC clarified IReV's role as a transparency tool, delays created a communication void that



eroded confidence. Still, the 2023 elections were among the most prepared since 1999, aided by reforms in the Electoral Act 2022, expanded polling units, and stakeholder engagement.

Media Ownership Case Study

Media ownership, gatekeeping, and editorial control have profoundly shaped political communication in Nigeria. Oyinloye et al. (2024) note that owners and editors selectively frame stories to reflect ideological or economic interests, undermining objectivity. Ojeka-John et al. (2024) add that ownership pressures dilute accountability journalism, favouring elite narratives. Igwe et al. (2024) highlight how journalists often resort to covert citizen journalism via online platforms to bypass restrictions.

Fake news further erodes trust. Unregulated digital platforms spread misinformation rapidly, influencing voter attitudes and disrupting democratic processes. Legacy media, increasingly reliant on social media content, amplify falsehoods (SSRC, 2020). During the 2023 elections, new websites churned out misleading stories for clicks, which spread across social platforms, deepening polarisation (Obasi, 2024). Political actors weaponised misinformation, using influencers and “situation rooms” to delegitimise opponents or suppress turnout (Okezie et al., 2025).

Media and Regional Loyalty Case Study

Institutional platforms have influenced democratic engagement, with debates becoming part of Nigeria’s electoral culture through the Nigeria Elections Debate Group (NEDG). These debates allow voters to assess candidates and encourage issue-based participation. Ahead of the 2023 elections, groups like the Nigerian Bar Association and Institute of Chartered Accountants invited aspirants Atiku Abubakar, Peter Obi, and APC’s Kashim Shettima to speak, extending debates into civic spaces.

Yet media coverage continues to shape perceptions. In 2019, Vanguard favoured PDP while Daily Trust leaned toward APC, reflecting ownership and regional loyalties. National newspapers often framed issues to benefit the incumbent APC, producing polarised reporting. In 2023, nearly 80% of coverage focused on logistics and controversies, while only 20% addressed substantive policies. Gender issues were almost absent, at just 0.4% of stories. Such imbalances show how media framing sidelines meaningful policy debates, reinforcing sensationalism over substance in Nigeria’s democratic process.



RESULT

The study found that:

1. Digital communication platforms are quite transformative but could pose high risk when totally dependent on as a tool for Political Communication
2. Nigerian political and media institutions are fragile as their vulnerability to ownership interference undermines democratic communication.
3. The Government Communication through Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) communication reform shows promise but faces credibility gaps as a result of controversies surrounding BVAS and IReV in 2023 general elections.

CONCLUSION

The study holds that political communication remains a central determinant or a standard to measure what the Nigeria's democratic growth looks like. It is important to mention that while the country has recorded over two decades of uninterrupted civilian rule, the sustainability of its democracy continues to be shaped by the quality and ethics of its communication processes. Digital platforms have opened new spaces for participation and transparency, enabling youth-led movements like #EndSARS and creating alternative channels for civic engagement. Yet, these same platforms have also amplified the dangers of misinformation, hate speech, and propaganda that threaten democratic legitimacy. The persistence of institutional fragility, media capture, and public distrust reveals that Nigeria's democratic communication ecosystem remains in a delicate balance between progress and regression. To achieve democratic sustainability, Nigeria must prioritise the institutionalisation of ethical, inclusive, and accountable political communication practices. Strengthening INEC's communication systems, enforcing media independence, and embedding digital literacy within civic education are critical steps forward. Ultimately, sustainable democracy in Nigeria depends not merely on periodic elections but on an informed, engaged citizenry and a communication culture that promotes transparency, equity, and truth. Only through such deliberate reformation of political communication can Nigeria's democracy evolve from procedural survival to genuine participatory governance.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommended that INEC should institutionalise ethical and inclusive political communication frameworks to promote transparency and civic engagement while committing politicians to codes of conduct

1. The study equally recommended the need to strengthen media independence and digital literacy through legal reforms that reduces political interference and ownership monopoly.
2. It recommended that INEC should expand its electoral communication channels and citizen engagement mechanism beyond traditional voter education to incorporate interactive, technology-driven platforms.



Ethical Clearance

Ethical consent was sought and obtained from the National Institute ethical committee. The purpose of this paper is to review political communication in Nigeria, identify its role, weakness, effectiveness and how it can be strengthened.

Sources of Funding

This paper was not funded by any outsider by the authors.

Conflict of Interest

There was no conflict of interest as declared by the authors since the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Author's Contribution

Dr. Eze, Uchenna Hyginus conceived the idea and drafted the initial manuscript, Dr. Abdulahi Adamu did a review of related literature while Dr. Jamila Aminu worked on the selected cases. All the authors jointly proof read the final manuscript.

Availability of data and materials

The datasets on which conclusions were made for this study are available on reasonable request.

Citation

Eze, U. H., Adamu, A. and Aminu, J. (2025). Government Political Communication and Democratic Sustainability in Nigeria: A Review: *International Journal of Sub-Saharan African Research*, 3 (4), 691-704

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