

# Embracing New Media in Political Communication: A Survey of Parliamentarians' Attitudes and Practices in a Changing Media Landscape in West Africa

Dr. Aminu Hamajoda<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> National Institute for legislative Studies

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## Abstract

This survey sought to find out the state of political communication among West African parliamentarians in view of the expanded mediativity that newer digital channels like social media, the internet and mobile telecommunication tools are bringing to the political landscape in addition to traditional political channels of party politics, rallies, meetings, constituency visits and traditional media like television, radio and newspapers. The study had deliberately focused on the three core parliamentary functions; lawmaking, representation and oversight, asking key questions under each function to delineate the views and practices of legislators in using media channels. Findings from this study show that although there is a remarkable improvement in acquisition of tools, legislators are reticent in deploying the full powers of new channels in interaction with citizens, preferring traditional channels like television and radio in activity propagation and political meetings and constituency visits to newer tools like e-petition, e-consultation, blogging, personal websites, e-polling and other forums. However there are evidences of rising Facebook use and intensive use of telephony and text messages in communicating with constituents. There are also evidences of the increased use of emails and internet research in gathering information for lawmaking.

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**Index terms**— digital media, political communication, legislators attitude, parliamentary communication, changing media landscape.

The electorate on the other hand can also benefit by participating and influencing decision and policy making processes. ??nwin (2012:3) delineates the unmissable potentials of the new digital and social media in political empowerment as space-liberty; the potential freedom of communicating with others across the globe, sharing liberty; the widespread creation and sharing of information and views as against the traditional top-to-bottom communication of government/corporate owned channels, and accessliberty; the reduction in cost in the creation and dissemination of information as exemplified by the new cellular phones that are equipped with audio and visual recorders coupled with internet connection. Indeed Information and communication technology is developing rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa despite glaring infrastructural constraints. Several reports (e.g. European Parliament Briefing, 2015, IPU World e-Parliament report, 2016) confirm the exponential growth of ICT especially the 'mobile revolution' that is penetrating the region and affecting all areas of life. But there are still challenges to overcome in regard to engaging sub-Saharan citizens in deliberative democracy.

The first challenge is the issue of poor network connection. The bandwidth challenge in sub-Saharan Africa is slowing the full impact of the exponential growth experienced in digital technology and the new media. Although ??amfir (2015:3) documents the improved linkage of Africa to the rest of the world through submarine cables, evacuating the broad bandwidth advantage to hinterland and especially landlocked countries like Mali and Central African Republics remains a challenge.

## 1 N

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The third challenge is what appears to be the politicians' selfish approach to the utilization of the new digital media. Frank (2010:22) mentions the habit of Kenyan politicians who create personal websites during elections but who abandon them after elections. It appears as if short term political calculations are given priority over long term plan to build an electoral base. This hit-and-run approach to using new media pervades the whole gamut of sub-Saharan e-democracy activities. In Nigeria for instance, politicians change their phone numbers and emails upon being elected, appointed or tried. Of course this may be attributed to the next challenge, risk.

The fourth challenge is the danger of uncontrolled interaction which MacNamara et al (2012) regard as pitfalls that may accompany the creation of a new media site specifically crafted for interaction with the citizens, among which are possibilities of vitriolic criticism and defamation of individuals and organizations; encounters that will make parliamentarians shudder and be reticent. Labamiji (2014:8) also documents the dysfunctional use of the social media in Nigeria in maligning, intimidating and discrediting political opponents, thereby creating a milieu for subsequent violent political and social conflicts.

The fifth challenge is the dominance of the traditional channels of communication. Most politicians still prefer the uni-directional media channels like television, radio and print. Robert & Namusonge's (2015:1) study of East African Parliamentarians affirm their overwhelming trust in traditional media.

The last challenge is the faulty assumption that once interactivity is established between representatives and constituents, mutual inputs are guaranteed in law and policy making. Duffy & Foley (2011:206) however conclude that citizens are not equipped or interested in extensive input to public hearings, although there is a possibility of limited engagement on topical issues that are of general interest to the public or issues of self-interest. Fox (2014:2) in his seminal report also observes the poor percentage of citizens who have visited the parliament website or have partaken in policy decisions, thereby concluding that "The problems with political engagement cannot be solved by technology / digital initiatives; they are part of the solution but not the solution".

## 2 II.

## 3 Methodology

This study is based on a questionnaire survey that attempted to sample legislators' views and practices in using contemporary communication channels in carrying out their representation, lawmaking and oversight functions. The survey had relied on some key pointers under the triangle of functions.

Under capacity and ITC support, the study sought to find out: a) the digital communication tools possessed by the parliamentarians, b) how satisfactorily equipped their legislative offices are, and c) the challenges they face in using available tools.

Under representation, the parliamentarians were asked many more several questions: a) how often they use new media for political communication with citizens by rating, b) how often they use new media as compared to traditional methods in gathering and polling opinions of their constituents on burning issues, policies and bills, c) How they propagate their legislative activities using new media vis-à-vis using traditional media, d) if they use any specific digital/new media for communicating with the youth, e) how they rate the effectiveness of parliamentary communication of its activities and f) which channels they rank in preference for parliamentary propagation.

Under the function of lawmaking, the study asked a) how parliamentarians gather information for lawmaking considering the additional new channel of internet research in relation to existing parliamentary resources like libraries, consultants and NGOs.

The study also inquired about (b) how the legislators get information from government agencies for purposes of oversight considering the current expanded mediativity of channels and forms of information.

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The questionnaire was translated into both French and Portuguese, the other two languages used in the West African Region. The study then created a receptacle database based on the form and subjected collected data to various analyses; mainly frequency, cross tables, graphic summaries, and few dependency variations to reveal the various attitudinal and usage patterns.

The survey targeted the first session of the yearly ECOWAS Parliament sitting (May, 2016) when 115 legislators from the 15 member states attended a sitting in Abuja, Nigeria. Below is the actual seats allocated to the various member states and the number of respondents:

## 4 III.

Results & Discussions a) Capacity, facilities and the Digital Divide Over 83% of parliamentarians range between the ages of 45 to 64 years, the range already acknowledged by IPU (2012) as the lowest in the world, but it is difficult to ascertain if age is an additional imperative in embracing the new media in relation to other constraints like lack of skills, poor connections and citizens' lack of access to the internet as table 3 show. A cross variation analysis show that those above 55 years do not select the internet as their means for propagating their activities and do not use any digital based methods for communicating with the youth despite the continuous promotion that youth form the backbone of the new media users in Africa (table 2). To be sure, the study shows that Legislators are well equipped to communicate with their constituents considering that over 70% of them have laptops and internet devices. Similarly the survey reveals that 71.43% of legislators' offices are equipped with desktop computers, 59.52% have adequate printing services, 66.67% have adequate telephony and 59.52% have adequate internet facilities. the desire to provide information and improve public understanding of the work and achievements of parliaments.

The prospect of parliamentarians embracing new channels of communication to ensure a broadbased link with constituents in ensuring popular democracy is exciting. Not only will decisions on bills and policies be collective and reflective of electorate but it will ensure that parliamentarians go beyond representation to be continuous delegates on the national fora. The survey listed the various forms of the new media to find out the extent of their use in political communication by West African parliamentarians (table 4). the other eight or more tools, one is, there are not existing on official parliamentary websites or, two, personal websites are not created by the lawmakers or, three, and most significantly, constituents have no access to the internet. In a report by National Democratic Institute, NDI (2015), a Ghanaian MP reiterates the prevalent use of text messaging among Ghanaian MPs but raises the issue of illiteracy among women as his reason for preferring traditional channels like radio and television. This indeed is confirmed by the parliamentarians' preferences for propagating their activities (table ??).

Not surprisingly, traditional channels are preferred in the propagation of individual parliamentarians' activities. Radio ranks number one as the preferred channel followed by Television .59% of parliamentarians still prefer the traditional media (Radio, TV and Print) in propagating their activities to new channels like personal websites, YouTube and blogging, although the internet followed by messaging are gaining ascendancy. A cross tabulation shows that most of the elderly parliamentarians between the ages of 55 to 75 do not use the internet for propagation. Williamson (2009:6) notes how parliamentarians globally focus more on self-promotion and one-way reportage as against devising strategies to enhance interactive engagement with the electorate.

## 5 Table 5 : Preferred Media for Parliamentary Publicity

Similar attitude attend to their views on publicity for the parliament. 79% rank radio and television as the best medium for publicizing parliamentary activities as against other channels like education, web services, mobile platforms, conferences and blogging. There is a certain level of reticence that although is unquantifiable among African parliamentarians, is further confirmed by their tendency to insularity and preference to directional communication after they are elected. This has also been confirmed by Robert & Namusonge's (2015:1) study of East African Parliamentarians. However a pragmatic view that the lawmakers prefer directional communication due to the reach the traditional channels like radio and television still have among their constituents is not less valid.

## 6 c) Lawmaking

Lawmaking is the cardinal role of parliamentarians around which several services are designed to equip them to perform their functions efficiently. Research and policy analysis are areas that various capacity building efforts are targeted at. Parliamentarians have arrays of services to choose from: parliamentary researchers, legislative aides, parliamentary institutions and parastatals and of course, personal research and opinions of their constituents. The survey shows that the internet rank as the most preferred means of gathering information for legislation by the parliamentarians (54%) followed by parliamentary researchers (45%) and NGOs and Civil societies (45%).

## 7 d) Oversight

Oversight of the activities of the government agencies forms a very important function of the parliament. Although public hearings, committee work and oversight tours remain central to oversight exercise, as Yamamoto (2007:49) points out, "Regular questioning can be used by parliament to hold the government to account". Regular

questioning is easier for non-presidential parliaments, but for lawmakers in presidential systems, questioning in oral and written forms for details takes on a different challenge since the president and his ministers are outside the parliament. It appears pertinent for legislators to be equipped with information at the personal level to be able to partake in hearings, committee work and plenary sessions. This study therefore sought to find the communication channels parliamentarians use in requesting and receiving adhoc inquiries and written questions for details and clarifications from government.

## Table 8 : Gathering Information From Government for Oversight

The result shows that email correspondence in addition to telephone conversations is getting established in inquiries and information gathering from government agencies.

IV.

## 9 Conclusion

It is pertinent for ECOWAS parliaments to deliberately set out to strengthen communication channels between lawmakers, the electorate and government agencies in view of the imminent expansion of mediality that telecommunications and the new digital media portent. In doing so, the channels under each parliamentary function should be assessed for facilitation. The various parliamentary websites need to be upgraded to host interactive tools like e-consultation, online discussions, e-petitions, on-line polls and alerting services. Legislators and their media aides should be trained specifically on those platforms and be supported in creating individual websites with the relevant forms and widgets enumerated above. Similarly training and sensitization of the parliamentarians and support staff should aim at functional groundings to eliminate the tendency to insularity.

## 10 V.

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Figure 1: Table 3 :

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<sup>2</sup>© 2016 Global Journals Inc. (US) Embracing New Media in Political Communication: A Survey of Parliamentarians' Attitudes and Practices

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WhatAreTheMainChallengesYouFaceUsingDigitalToolstoCommunicateWit	Frequency	Percent
Lack of Skills and Training to Use Digital Tools	29	65.91 %
Citizens Lack Access to Internet	25	56.82 %
Privacy Issue In Technology Use	18	40.91 %
Lack of Access to Internet	16	36.36 %
Trying to Give Equal Priority to On and Off line Communication	9	20.45 %
Communication Received is Unrepresentative	8	18.18 %
Feeling Overwhelmed with Quantity of Communication	7	15.91 %

Figure 2:

HowDoYouGetInformationFromGovernmentForOversightPurposes	Frequency	Percent
Electronic Copies Through Emails	23	52.27 %
Hardcopies Through Messenger	21	47.73 %
Telephone Conversations	17	38.64 %
SoftCopies Through Portable Devices	12	27.27 %
Others	10	22.73 %

Figure 3:

1

Country	Seats	Respondents	Country	Seats	Respondents
Ghana	8	2	Niger	6	3
Guinea	6	3	Nigeria	35	6
Guinea Bissau	5	2	Senegal	6	3
Liberia	5	2	Sierra Leone	5	1
Mali	6	4	Togo	5	4

[Note: © 2016 Global Journals Inc. (US)]

Figure 4: Table 1 :

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Frequency	Percent	Cum. Percent
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Figure 5: Table 2 :

4

Use of New Media for Political Communication

Video Sharing

Blog

Photosharing

Personal Website

Email Newsletter

Twitter

Contact Form

Official Website

Messaging

Facebook

Personal Email

-1

4 9 14 19 24 29 34 39 44  
contribute to West Africa

By ranking, Personal Emailing, Facebook

and Messaging form the main digital channels

parliamentarians use for political communication with

their constituents. The other channels ranging from

contact forms to video sharing are still far from being

popular among West African Parliamentarians.

Not less than 60% of parliamentarians signify

that they use personal emails to communicate with

constituents, 40% messaging and 56% using face

book. IPU (2016:55) reports 56% of legislators worldwide

using the new media as compared 13% in 2010, but

confirms that the rest of the tools are either under

consideration or not planned for at all. Three factors may

Propagation of Legislator's Activities

41%

59%

Traditional Media New Media

[Note: How Do You Propagate Your Parliamentary Activities? Figure1: How Do You Propagate Your Parliamentary Activities?]

Figure 6: Table 4 :

6

Figure 7: Table 6 :

7

Figure 8: Table 7 :

.1 Acknowledgements

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