



POLICYBRIEF

DIGITAL CAMPAIGNS AND ELECTIONS: WHAT WORKS?

BACKGROUND

The advent of digital platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube and to a lesser extent, websites, has given people unprecedented access to information about elections and enabled them to express their opinions, interact with candidates and get actively involved in electoral campaigns, in real time. It has also given unimaginable speed and reach to information, broken down distance between political actors and citizens, with the growth and ownership of smartphones giving many people unfettered access to unverified information from social media and other digital communication platforms.

Globally, the last 5-10 years has seen politicians, political parties, civil society groups and think tanks, all using social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to communicate with and engage voters. Regular individuals, politicians, “social commentators” and thought leaders alike are able to voice their opinions, engage with a wide network, and connect with other like-minded individuals, thus making these digital spaces an increasingly important element in political communication (Keamey, Michael, 2013).

The Corona Virus pandemic and its attendant restrictions on mass gathering of people have also made the usage of digital platforms even more imperative in this year’s elections in Ghana, because the traditional political rallies are outlawed under the Executive Instruments pursuant to the Imposition of Restrictions Act, 2020 (Act 2012). However, with over 6 million social media users in January 2020 (DataReportal 2020) it is evident that political campaigners need to learn to use the various digital platforms effectively and that law makers need to learn to manage the digital space more adeptly, both parties navigating possible pitfalls.

PENPLUSBYTES WEBINAR SERIES-A FIRST STEP TO APPROACHING THE ISSUES

As a tech-driven organisation and a leader in the promotion of Media and Information Literacy in Ghana, Penplusbytes set its radar on investigating how politicians are using the digital space for their campaign activities towards election 2020. Penplusbytes engaged political communicators, digital marketing strategists and persons with experience in political marketing to speak to the good, the bad and the ugly of online campaigns and digital elections. These discussions were done over a three-week period in webinar series 10,11, and 12 and it is hoped the outcomes of these conversations help shape how online political campaigns in future elections are held. The 10th Webinar titled Elections 2020: Tech Driven Elections and Digital Campaigns featured Dr. Bernard Tutu-Boahene a Political Marketing Strategist and Head of the Department of Marketing & Supply Chain Management at the Methodist University College Ghana, Mr. Frederick Avornyo a Media and Communications Specialist and Mr. Ameyaw Kissi Debrah, Lifestyle Blogger and a Social Media Influencer. The 11th Webinar titled Elections 2020: What Every Political Campaigner should be doing Digitally had Dr. Nansata Saliyah Yakubu a Democracy Engineer and Mr. Maximus Ametorgoh a Digital Marketer and Analytics Specialists. The 12th Webinar titled Elections 2020: The Online Campaign, the Good, the Bad and the Ugly had as lead discussants Dr. Koby Mensah a Senior Lecturer at the University of Ghana Business School and a Political Marketing Expert. Dr. Zakari Bukari, Political Marketing Strategist, Department of Marketing and Supply Chain Management, Universiti Putra Malaysia Mr. Charles Nii Ayiku Ayiku, Lecturer, University of Professional Studies Accra (UPSA)-Ghana. In all 2450 people participated in the discussions on multiple online channels.

KEY ISSUES/CONCERNS

1

The power of brand awareness

Political campaigners just like marketers should understand that we live in a world of brands. It is important for them to develop a campaign which focuses on their candidates, policies, campaign history and the campaign theme and any relevant issue that may inform voter choices. The brand should be clear and be massively publicised to get voters' attention.

2

Improve Digital Literacy

Low digital literacy of political party campaign managers and strategists and generally low levels of functional literacy in the population, may be a stumbling block to actively engaging in virtual campaigning. Political parties can learn new ways of engaging netizens using channels such as Tik-Tok, Pinterest and other new digital platforms that allows one to communicate with simple messages to the many electorates online who might not necessary be completely literate.

3

Learn from Digitally Advanced Countries

Political campaigners should take pains to study how politicians in the technologically advanced countries like the United States of America have used the online campaigns to win elections. This approach would enable politicians to draw lessons from their campaigns, taking note of the digital tools they employ, the messages and channels they use and how they can be adapted. This of course should be done with a consideration to our cultural context and political antecedents.

4

Voter Database

Compiling a database of voters is very essential to the success of online political campaigns. The database can be segmented at different levels to enhance communication with electorates. Since the EC is the owner of the database of voters in Ghana, it may be useful to put in a policy which allows that data to be shared with political parties to allow for equal access. In the absence of such a policy, only parties with huge resources can independently collect data of voters.

5

Visualise online political campaigns

Online political communications in Ghana is text-heavy so the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) and political parties must explore other strategies such as memes, cartoons etc. for spreading political and civic messages. Visualisations of policies will facilitate understanding especially among people who may not have the luxury of time or the ability to read the bulky texts in manifestos, the constitution etc..

KEY ISSUES/CONCERNS

6

Educate, Train Dedicated Personnel

Institutions teaching political communications should include online advertising digital campaigning into the curriculum to make learners fit for the new world of technological and digital campaigning. Political parties should employ only qualified digital communicators to handle online campaign activities in the future.

7

Regulating Paid Adverts

Paid social media advertisements provide extensive targeting opportunities with tailored messages for hundreds of different audiences. However, like most politics related activity, it is imperative that the authorities put a cap on the amount and nature of advertising so as to avoid creating an unlevel playing field among political actors.

8

Improve Digital Infrastructure

If online campaigns are to become the norm, it will be imperative that telecommunications infrastructure is widespread and evenly distributed across rural and urban areas.

To this end, government and other stakeholders must begin to unfold an investment plan which will ensure that infrastructure in especially rural communities, is built up and access becomes more equal.

9

Develop Protocol for Online Political Campaigns

It is highly recommended that the Electoral Commission of Ghana develops a protocol that directs how politicians are to campaign online. Such a policy would help control the spate of fake news, hate speech and cyber bullying. It will further help to sanitize online political campaigns and also make politicians more cautious of the content they disseminate online.



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CONCLUSIONS

Politicians have had to change their style of communicating with the electorates by making use of the digital spaces in the last few years. However, it is evident that policy actions are needed to deal with the various issues enumerated above to effectively engage in online political campaigns which would inure to the benefit of the electorate and the country.

ABOUT PENPLUSBYTES



Penplusbytes is a not-for-profit organization driving change through innovations in four key areas: using new digital technologies to enable good governance and accountability, investigating new media which drive innovations, enhancing oversight for effective utilisation of mining, oil and gas revenue and conducting research to improve health and environmental outcomes.

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