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**SOCIAL MEDIA AUGMENTATION OF POLITICAL ACTIVITIES AND KNOWLEDGE-GAP OF ELECTORATES: AN APPRAISAL OF PUBLIC OPINION IN SELECT STATES OF NIGERIA**

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article history:</b>                      Received: 17 June 2024                      Revised: 7 Aug 2024                      Accepted: 25 Aug 2024                      Published: 1 Sept 2024</p>	<p>This study examined the supposition that social media contents can lead to active knowledge of democratic political development among electorates. The setting is in Nigeria. The objectives were to: ascertain whether social media political contents can alter voting decisions; evaluate whether social media political contents can cause the acceptance of manifestoes of political parties and to ascertain the peculiar age group that are sensitive to political messages by social media exposes. This study was on Agenda setting, the Cultivation and knowledge gap theories. It adopted survey research method in gathering data through questionnaire administered on 578 respondents drawn from the residents of Bayelsa, Imo (Southern) and Kogi (North Central) states of Nigeria at 12,463,500. The study found that social media political contents can sway the public decision-making on political issues, judged by the extent of agenda-setting function in media contents. It concluded that there is a relationship between media contents exposure and the extent of knowledge about political manifestoes of parties. It recommends that Nigerian politicians intensify the adoption of social media contents in political campaigns to bridge the knowledge gap assumingly created by using other media facilities and contents.</p>
<p><b>Keywords:</b>                      Political participation, Knowledge gap, Media politics, Social gender</p> <p></p>	

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## INTRODUCTION

Axiomatically, mass media service transect all places occupied by humans and non-humans. This is because everything that provides information belong to the classification of mass media. In a broader sense, the mass media are split into traditional media, the mainstream media and the social media. Any of these media classifications have the attribute to bridge information gaps between persons in the society. Consequently, wherever people are present and whatever the status, all forms of information come from the mass media. In Nigeria, the majority of the population reside in rural areas, and also in the urban centers. Both the rural and the urban center residents have access to media whether traditional, the mainstream media or the social media. Akpan (2022) maintains that the primary objective of media institutions lie in providing information, enlightenment, education and entertainment. In spite of the availability of mass media service to all, information generation and distribution is not at the disposal of all persons. Information dissemination especially on political issues are at the control of few persons who belong to the political parties and sometimes own the medium of information dissemination. In some cases, the media owners disseminate the information through the traditional oral media as opinion leaders and sometimes employ others to disseminate information to suit interest and purposes. The media owners and the information disseminators form a set of gatekeepers on the flow of information to the society. Therefore, the media owners and the employed disseminators regulate the quantum of information in circulation and managed it by leaving the audience to accept and act in decision making according to the dictates or direction set by the media whether traditional, mainstream or social media particularly on issues of political participation.

In this way, the political class through the respective parties can measure the pulse of the audience on any given topic or issue in the way media stimulus is framed. Often in politics, to achieve a desired political result, political communicators package communication to achieve maximum impacts (Perloff, 2015). In cosmopolitan cities, one of the social basic facilities is the high concentration of media institutions. It is assumed that the availability of many information dissemination institutions can prompt high level of enlightenment and political education. But the understanding of a political party's manifesto or following political activities cannot simply mean accessibility to the media. Rather, it may be due to the capacity of the political party to simplify the process of delivering the message. This is because, information interpretation has much to do with the phenomena of social factors influencing the environment of the message receiver. This means that political parties, candidates and supporters go extra miles to campaign, canvass, persuade and convince electorate to vote by using all aspects of the traditional, mainstream and social media. Newman (2020) notes that one of the basic reasons political parties engage in campaigns is to convince the citizens and give reasons to get elected representatives in offices.

Observably, media information about political parties and candidates tend to slow after elections. The political candidates like commercial products are packaged to the people by the promotion of political party programmes aimed at gaining votes of the electorate (Azari 2020).

No matter the political interest of the party and the nature of the contenders, it is certain that no party or candidate has ever failed to utilize media service. There are many channels of information available to the leaders of political parties for the purpose of furnishing the public on the daily programmes. The mainstream media and the social media are used by political parties to frame contents of news, features, editorials, cartoons, pictures for and against other parties and candidates.

In the nearly paperless century, the social media has come to be the latest of the ways which political leaders apply in reaching the electorate. This is because, there seem to be no arm of the government, communities or cities that has not started deriving gains of social media platforms due to the availability of the internet systems. Likewise, a greater percentage of persons are also connected to the internet system of communication even in Nigeria. Although the social media had been previously seen to be for trivial matters

of persons, it has been adopted by individuals and groups to cover transactions of many economic and social activities. Emphatically, one of the social activities that has taken prominence of space in the social media is political activities. But then, it is difficult to say which gender of persons cherish the use of the social media for political activities above others, neither is it so easy to say the level of acceptability of the social media contents to bridge political knowledge gaps. More so, it is an uphill task to put on the surface the types of social media political contents which the electorate patronize especially in cities of Nigeria. These are the major issues which this study intend to unveil in two cities of Nigeria and probably spread generalization to other cities of the country.

### *Statement of the Problem*

In 1999, Nigerians witnessed the return to democratic governance. From the prowess of political parties, all the states have been under the control of civil democratic administrations. Through the efforts of the Federal and state democratic administrations, each of the states maintain functional telecommunication systems that facilitate the use of internet system. The procurement and installation of internet facilities has caused heavy social media accessibility by the large population. The political class capitalized on the availability of the media to penetrate the urban and the rural communities and maintain dominance over certain enclaves. The implication is that there ought to be high level of political knowledge among gender spread in Nigeria. Nonetheless, observation of Nigerian elections show that a high accessibility to social media platforms may not be equal to equitable knowledge of political activities for participation and growth of democracy. The men and the women reluctantly partake in each of the elections either at the rural or at the urban centers at the whims and caprices of the political leaders. Among Nigerians, a probe of political participation from campaigns, debates, discussions and voting tend to reflect wide gaps of information about political activities. There has never been near or equal number of votes from the men and the women. But the platforms of information to the men are the same platforms of information to the women to account for fair understanding of the political party programmes.

Therefore, the statement of the problem is whether there has been social media segregated advancements in the enlightenment of the electorate by political parties in the cities of Nigeria. More so, does the assume existence of information gap affect the progress of democracy in Nigeria. This study is attempt to fulfill two main objectives which were specifically to: (1) Know the most frequent political activity contents in social media that influence the knowledge gap of electorate in Nigeria; (2) Find out the most outstanding way that individuals respond to political activity contents in the social media in Nigeria; (3) Ascertain the age group of persons sensitive to social media political contents in Nigeria. This paper has the originality whereby the topic about food security viewed through publications with combination of publication on three states of Nigeria which were Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi.

Empirically, this study is expected to add to the available data in the area of political online campaigns and education, the new media application and effects on voter behaviour in elections in Nigeria. The data would also add to the existing empirical data in the area of political communication. Theoretically, this study is to provide insight on the workings of media theories with respect to the role of knowledge gap and technological determinism theories in political communication. Professionally, political parties, media

practitioners and communication scholars can find this research useful, as it would not only bridge the gap in literature but also be of immense importance to future researchers. The study covers only the residents of Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi states. Attention was paid particularly to only the responses through the use of survey methods rather than the analysis of contents of specific social media sites sponsored by political parties. Also the study did not go into the mentioning of the nomenclatures of political parties and the

methods of the social media campaigns, advertising, news, panel discussions, podcasts posts and comments applied.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review includes the definition of political participation, types of political participation, media and political knowledge gap, and the social media in politics. An extension has been done on the theoretical framework and the review of related empirical studies

## **POLITICAL PARTICIPATION: A CONCEPTUAL APPRAISAL**

Political participation refers to the voluntary response of individuals or groups to be part of the process of governance in any country. It is the willingness of the citizenry to directly or indirectly contribute on ways and methods of governance. Political participation of an individual or the collective participation of persons affect the outcome of the process of governance. As an activity of an individual or group, political participation can be in policy making to influence the decisions of government. It can also be in making support to programmes initiated or proposed by the government of a state or country. In many countries, it is the constitutional right of persons or everyone to engage in political activities. In broad sense, the involvement of persons in political activity can directly be in sharing information, attending political meetings, voting, discussing and propelling interest, and financial contributions, promoting interactions with elected representatives or leadership of governments, enrolment in a party, canvassing and registering voters, campaigning during elections, or contesting in an election for public and party offices. These are some of the very major political activities that are considered in any society irrespective of the system of civil government. It is not unusual that in governance, some persons assume positions of leadership to constitute the administration that make political decisions and implement decisions at the mandate of others who are the electorate. Whatever the type of government few persons are the representatives of the majority who often reach out to the public on the activities and direction of governance using the media platforms. The political leaders derive authority from the electorate convinced to vote during elections. Since politics is expected to be voluntary, it requires the political parties to convince the electorate using information channels of the mass media.

On the other hand, there is no society that political participation is blanket. There exist apathy in a situation which individuals and or groups lack interest, or do not show interest in political affairs. It is also reflected in the lack of active involvement in the overall political affairs. Norris (2020) refers to apathy as a state of withdrawal from or indifference to political actions or activities. A number of issues can cause political apathy among the citizens. These may include, violence, intimidation, threats to life and livelihoods, lack of financial resources. It can be lack of credibility on the outcome of election by the manipulation of results. Ibrahim (2021) mentions that issues that negatively affect electoral activities are not limited to malpractices of rigging and electoral violence in Nigeria. These factors determine the democratic culture and contribute to the political participation. The essence of political participation is that citizens are to share views through unrestrained debates and discussions.

## **TYPES OF POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

The types and classifications either as formal or informal are useful for a vibrant and robust democracy. Each of the type can strongly aid the participation of people, especially the youths, in a formal institutional political processes. With technology of the social media, the people of an area can also informally partake in making representativeness in the political system and reduce cases of disenfranchisement.

Election related political participation includes the direct and open participation of the people in the electoral process or activities by a large population of the citizens. This involves registration, voting, campaign meeting, party meeting, party funding and contest for elective office. Non- election related participation includes contacting political leaders, expressing political opinion and making political demands for community development activities.

In a political society, some individual involvement in political matters are independent, while in others, it is induced. Politics in many developing nations like Nigeria sometimes is a combination of both. Autonomous participation refers to those actions or activities that are generated by the actors themselves, which aims to influence governmental action and authoritative allocation of values. Induced or mobilized participation on the other hand, are those activities or actions that are initiated by a different person or group of persons other than the actors, which are aimed at influencing decisions of government. That is, induced or mobilized participation are those activities that are initiated outside the person or group of persons that act to influence government decisions (Earl, 2022).

### **MEDIA AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE GAP**

The extent of political participation recorded by any society is determined by the extent of political awareness of the citizens. This is the work of the media through the print, broadcast or the social media. Political awareness refers to knowledge levels among the electorate and other concerned stakeholders. Political awareness is a measure of media message acceptability and understanding. It explains the correlation between political awareness and mass media political messages in the public. Exposure to messages in the media is a determinant to a large extent of awareness and the progress of political development. Political awareness is intended to bring about active participation in community affairs through knowledge impartation. There are many avenues for political awareness. It ranges from peer groups and social institutions. The main stream media surpass all in terms of reaching a higher number of persons and cost. The point here is that not all forms of political communication are delivered through the mass media but also through the interpersonal and social media platforms that abound. The media have always been involved in politics, formation of public opinion, perception of candidates for political offices, definition of social reality and social norms. They educate and enlighten the audience about the political process by setting agenda or beaming searchlight on issues and events of political parties considered important for the society.

### **THE SOCIAL MEDIA IN POLITICS**

Mass media institutions play significant roles in political campaign processes by providing platforms for political ideologies and manifestoes of political parties to be presented and analyzed. The media open opportunities for electorate to get political information and discuss the programmes and manifestoes of different political parties and candidates before, during and after the elections

From the foregoing, it is the duty of the media to inform and enlighten people on political issues as well as stimulate the willingness to participate in the process. The people can also be made to understand that participation in elections is a right and civic responsibility. These responsibilities cover media of the main

stream in radio, television and newspapers and the novel social media of various online platforms. Ideally, democracy thrives on the principle of informed electorate by the making of responsible choices and decisions. The mass media have remained a factor in the political sphere linking the political parties, the candidates and the electorate. In the recent years, the effects of social media in the area of politics started to show itself in Nigerian states where there is a high number of online population. Political parties and leaders started to keep contact with people through social media tools such as Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and YouTube channels. On social networks Facebook and Twitter, people have much more

contacts than they see in their daily lives. Akpan (2022) says that these social networks facilitate connections between people and their weak ties and also the information flow through these weak ties. This creates a nature of viral information flow. So, when a post or another form of media is shared by a user the viral nature of these platforms enables it to reach much more people than it would be possible in any other way. This is especially true when the sharing is not a personal but a general issue such as a political sharing. Political information sharing flow and reach people even who do not have any connection with the initial poster. This sharing can be to create political awareness or to mobilize a protest movement. During the election periods, the social media can be used actively for propaganda. Similar to the examples worldwide, political activists and organizations started to use social media in Turkey to create political awareness and in some cases to mobilize protests.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***Agenda Setting Theory***

The Agenda Setting theory helps in the understanding of the effects of mass media content on individuals particularly the target audience. This theory also explains the effects of the media on political systems. It describes the influence which the media can have in determining not only the issues that members of the society talk about, but also, how they think about them. The relevance of this theory in this work arises from the fact that the media set the agenda for the members of the public to follow from debates and discussions about the 2023 one off governorship elections in three select states of Nigeria. In addition, this theory is relevant to establish that the electorates got to know about the candidates for elective positions through the media contents. The implication is that the availability of such information to the electorate can affect decisions on the choice of candidate and political party.

### ***Knowledge gap theory***

Knowledge gap theory is a mass communication theory that states that wealthier and more educated people acquire information from mass media faster than lower socioeconomic classes. This means that in knowledge gap theory wealthy people have greater access to media information and benefit more from it. Therefore, as mass media grows, so too does the gap in knowledge between the higher and lower social classes (Drew, 2023)

## **METHODOLOGY**

The survey method and literature review are the main methodology in this study. The literature review has been done through document analysis from previous studies. One of it is on “Social media platforms and political participation: A study of Jordanian youth engagement”. In this, Alodat, Al-Qora'n, & Abu (2021) examines the impact of social media on political participation among Jordanian youth. Utilizing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), the research analyzes data from a survey of 334 young people. The findings indicated that social media significantly enhances political participation. Gender plays a moderating role, with the frequency of social media use positively impacting political engagement among males, while the purpose of social media use shows a stronger effect among females. This study highlights the importance of considering gender differences when developing strategies to engage youth in political processes. The wide adoption of social media platforms has altered how people communicate, obtain information, and participate in society. This research investigates the moderating effect of certain factors on the impact of social media on political involvement among Jordanian youth. The findings show that social media has a favorable and considerable impact on political participation. Gender was also discovered to have a strong moderating effect on the relationship between social media use and political participation. The uniqueness of this work is that it is different from the present work which concentrates on the voters within the three mentioned states of Nigeria. In addition, this work is to find out



the types of social media contents rather than the type of social media platforms that electorates prefer in having knowledge of political activities.

The study adopted the survey method since it provides a scientific approach of measuring the opinion and perception or attitude of people on the workability of a process or phenomena. The survey method was the use of web based pattern otherwise called the online survey. The residents of Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi states in Nigeria constituted the population of the study. According to the City Population (2022) which collaborate National Population Commission of Nigeria and National Bureau of Statistics attest that population figures for Nigerian states show high error rates since census results are disputed. Hence, states and area figures are computed using geospatial data showing the population of Bayelsa at 2,537,400, Imo 5,459,300 and Kogi 4,466,800. This gave a total of 12,463,500 to form the population of this study. In a very large population research, it is advisable to restrict the sampling size to at least 600 persons while in very small population, the number can be kept at not less than 50 for reliability and convenience of data collection (Akpan, 2020). Consequently, the choice of 600 persons was proportionately spread across the population of the three states of Kogi at 215, Bayelsa 122 and Imo 263 in Nigeria. A simplified questionnaire containing 10 questions was raised for the residents to provide answers to questions covering the objectives and research questions of this study. The questions were close ended and had four options each ranging from type of political activity contents on social platforms, the most frequent way of responding to political activities on social media platform and the most common age grade of persons that are political message users on social media platforms to enable a clear computation of figures and ascertain the gap in knowledge of the residents on political activities in states of Nigeria.

In the distribution of the questionnaire per the state, the headquarters of the select states serving as the capital city and administrative centers were taken. Hence, in Bayelsa state, the capital city of Yenogoa was picked, Owerri was picked for Imo state and in Kogi state, and the capital city of Lokoja was adopted. More so, questionnaire were distributed along two major roads per the capital city. The capital city and roads are: Yenogoa for Bayelsa state, the two major roads picked are (Harbour Road and Oil mill road), Lokoja for Kogi state, the two major roads taken are (Taiwo road and Mount Patti road), Owerri for Imo state, the two roads taken are (Royce road and Douglas road).

In the data collection and analysis, out of 600 copies of questionnaire which were distributed, only 578 or 98 percent copies were retrieved and accepted for analysis.

Table 1: Most Frequent Social media Political Contents Accessed by Electorate

Political Contents/Activities	Total Responses	Total Percentage
Party Consultations	66	11
Party Meetings	90	15
Party Receptions	120	21
Party Rallies	310	53
Total	578	100

Source: Field Survey 2024.

Data in Table 1 shows that in the social media platforms, political content stories that influence electorate most are reports on rallies. It shows that out of 578 persons, 310 or 53 percent agree while consultations had 66 or 11 percent as the least.

Table 2: The most outstanding practice of reacting to political contents in the social media

Ways of Reactions	Total Responses	Total %
Share	365	63
Comment	91	16
Like	40	7
Message	82	14
Total	578	100

Source: Field Survey 2024.

In Table 2, data shows that the most common practice of reacting to political contents is by sharing at 365 or 63 persons responses while like had 40 or 7 percent the least.

Table 3: Age grade of social media political contents users

Age Grade	Total Response	Total Percentage
18 -30	376	65
31 – 43	102	18
44 – 56	100	17
57 – Above	-	-
Total	578	100

Source: Field Survey 2024

Table 3 shows that the age grade of persons who use social media political contents are mostly those on the age brackets of 18 – 30 at 376 or 65 percent responses against 57 and above which had a zero score and zero percent response

## RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### The Most Frequent Political Activity Contents in Social Media

From the frequency of Table 1 analyzed, six major political contents were identified. These were campaigns, meetings, consultations, rallies and receptions. In the response of electorate, analysis showed that rallies had the highest at 310 responses or 53 percent against consultations at 66 responses or 11 percent as the least. This means that much of political party activities such as meetings, receptions and

door to door campaigns are not given prominence in the social media. Akinola (2022) says that campaigns and rallies contents, including endorsements from celebrities or influential figures, can significantly shape public opinion and influence how voters perceive candidates or policies. Only those with the exposure to issues of rallies by political parties tend to have a wide knowledge of political activities. But this seems not to be the reality since it is at the consultation levels and meetings that major decisions are taken by political parties. These are stages of political activities meant for the select persons rather than the all comers' rallies where songs and jublations take center stage on mere promises and pledges which are rarely fulfilled to the electorate.

### The Most Outstanding Way Electorate Respond to Social Media Political Contents

In the analysis of Table 2, the various ways which electorate respond to political contents in the social media included sharing, comments, likes and messages. The responses showed that sharing scored 365 or 63 percent against like at 40 or 7 percent. This shows that sharing news in social media has become a phenomenon of increasing social, economic and political importance because individuals freely participate



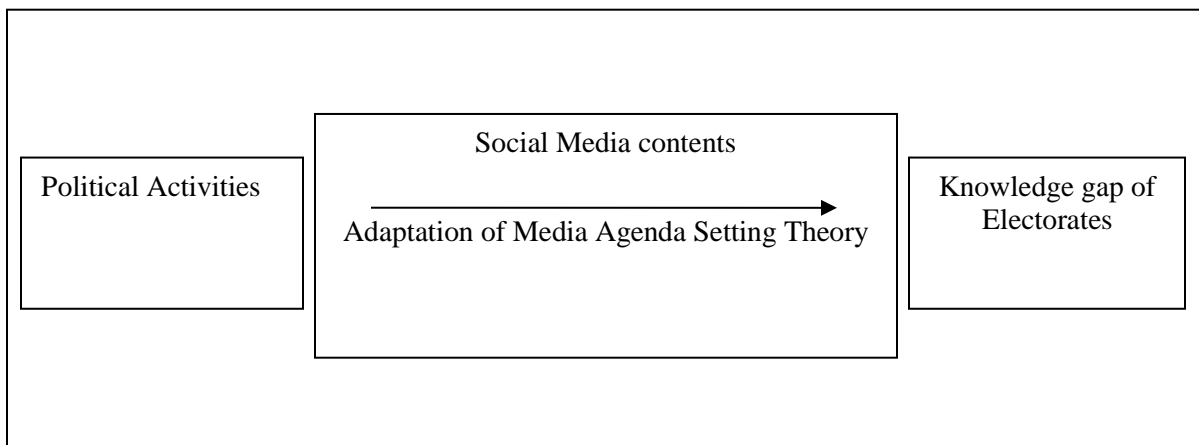
in news production and diffusion in large virtual communities. Ju and Lee (2021) say that in regards to political participation, social media has emerged as a novel venue for people to voice opinions, connect with others who share related viewpoints, and engage in social action.

### The Age Grade Sensitive to Social Media Political Contents in Nigeria

As reflected in Table 3 it shows that the age grade of persons who use social media political contents are mostly those on the age brackets of 18 – 30 at 376 or 65 percent responses against 57 and above which had a zero score and zero percent response. This in confirmation that around the globe, social media have become a centerpiece in young adults' lives. Particularly with smartphones, young adults literally are on social media 24 hours per week, permanently connected to the world and peers. When comparing the current generation to the older counterparts, there is a fundamental difference in media use behaviours. While young adults, aged 16–25, rely on digital platforms or messenger services, such as Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, or WeChat, to get the news, the older generation is much more likely to be exposed to traditional news sources such as television or newspapers. At the same time, there are dozens of studies around the globe demonstrating that, traditionally, young adults are less interested in traditional media compared to older generations less likely to vote, and generally less politically sophisticated (Binder et al. 2021).

It has been noted that social media can build new relationships between political actors and young adults, enable social interaction about political topics, connect people, enhance political opinion expression, equalize engagement and generally foster participation as well as boost voter turnout or contribute to social cohesion. This supports Smith (2021) that the defining characteristics of each generation and the emerging age gap have the power to shape politics, elections and voting trends in the years to come. In a nutshell, young citizens are less religious, more concerned about social and public policy issues, and favors an activist government. They stray from traditional values and are more accepting of different social groups. Amenyeawu (2021) supports that there has also been generated interest in politics by the younger generation as political communication and campaigns have become more appealing to them through social media.

Table 4: Conceptual framework for social media contents application of media agenda setting on political activities for bridging knowledge gap of electorates.



## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In Nigeria, it is not long that the social media platform services have been introduced and adopted for political campaigns. In the pre-independence and after-independence elections, the traditional and the mainstream media played critical successes and failures. The Nigerian media of that era carved the credibility niche on the provision of messages on elections and largely mold the perception of the electorate. These feats of the media came through daily reports, analysis and interpretation of issues and events surrounding the elections. The introduction of social media has brought varying comments on the positives and the negatives. Some sections of persons, especially those within the age bracket of 60 and above think that social media is nothing short of fake news, propaganda, hate speeches and indecent contents. It is only those in the age bracket of 18 to 58 that see the social media opportunities effectively use in relating messages. These age brackets frequently use the social media for real time delivery of messages and for purposes of creating User Generated messages. This study concludes that the knowledge gap about political activities is low among the elderly persons in states of Nigeria while the gap is high among the youthful age of persons. This not a commendable omen for political development in states of Nigeria since, there is no fusion of knowledge between the youths and the elderly groups. In this era of social media, there is need to blend the multi-use of the old and the present new or social media to make more strives in the provision and spreading of knowledge on political party activities. This is the new road map for the bridging of information gaps and broadening of the information frontiers especially about political party activities among the electorate towards the promotion and enhancement of democratic values and participation in decision making of countries including Nigeria.

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