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# Dialogic Communication on Digital Platforms as Public Relations Technique: A Case of Two Political Parties

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## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary politics, the Internet generally provides information to the public about engagements and events. It encourages users to interact, network, co-create, and participate in political activities and social movements. The Internet has become a virtual platform and tool for information dissemination and political dialogue. There have been several calls on political parties, especially during elections, to be more open and transparent with citizens in their campaign messages. This made the discourse on electorate engagement and participation in campaign messages topical worldwide. Most political parties are also compelled to heed the call by

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developing innovative ways of engaging the electorate, particularly in an election year. Thus, Prasad (2018) observed how political parties in India were using different avenues to execute their plans for political victory and underscored how important it is for political organisations to have two-way communication with their internal and external publics. Political parties in Ghana have responded to these calls by employing various communication strategies, including those related to social media, for reaching out to electorates. However, how they have ensured two-way communication in a dialogic way has yet to be studied. This study analyses the social media pages of Ghana's two major political parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), to ascertain how dialogic engagements or Public Relations (PR) principles are applied in their political arrangements with electorates on social media.

Both parties have used social media to promptly and efficiently disseminate campaign messages, often bypassing traditional media outlets such as television and radio. This allows them to reach a wider audience, particularly younger voters who may be more engaged on social media than traditional media. Both parties post updates on their campaign events on Facebook and Twitter, share photos and videos, and engage with followers through comments and direct messages. They also use targeted ads to reach specific voters based on age, gender, location, ideologies, and interests.

In recent years, new media and technology have changed communication patterns, interpersonal interaction, and social and political discussions. Social media are web-based services that allow groups, individuals, and organisations to connect, interact, and collaborate to build social communities and networks through co-creation, sharing, and modification of copy and super-copy on various user-generated contents (McCay-Peet & Quan-Haase, 2017, p. 17). This has caught the attention of media and communication scholars, political scientists, sociologists, and international relations scholars who have studied the various aspects of social media usage (Golan et al., 2019). The commencement of web social media followed the cyber optimism that characterised studying the Internet in the 1990s. The studies emphasised the power of technology and its capacity to overcome physical, economic, political, social, and individual obstacles (Curran et al., 2012).

Cornelissen (2014) explains that the advent of Web 2.0 presents opportunities to organisations to develop their content without being over-reliant on journalists for publication. This also accords organisations a

chance to promptly interact with their audience. This interactivity accorded to organisations by Web 2.0 underscores the concept of Dialogic Communication or Dialogic Public Relations. The proponents of Dialogic Public Relations argue for a public relations practice that allows the public to be involved and participate in critical decision-making that affects their well-being (Kent & Chen, 2017). This theory will thus help us to provide insights into how dialogic the social media handles of NDC and NPP are in their engagements with electorates.

Recently, corporate organisations have been taking advantage of new digital technologies to engage their stakeholders on issues of concern. Online activities related to politics are helpful, encouraging the youth to partake in political events (Quintelier & Vissers, 2008). Internet use, political information, and dialogue are associated with one another. The use of social media by political parties is widespread in developed and developing countries. This trend plays a crucial role in elections, especially in developing countries like Ghana, Nigeria, and Rwanda. In a developing country like Ghana, political parties and actors have very active social media pages to disseminate messages to social media users and the electorate (Michaelsen, 2011). The impact is, however, minimal due to the level of literacy and Internet penetration and usage in certain areas.

Conversely, developed countries experience a more significant impact because of the high usage of the Internet (Riaz, 2010). Social networking sites (SNS) significantly influence citizens' social and political learning, especially the youth (Khan & Shahbaz, 2015). Thus, the Internet and social media have become increasingly crucial for disseminating political information (McAllister, 2015).

According to Lattimore et al. (2009), social media is drastically changing and impacting the face of Public Relations practice in contemporary times. Social media, in general, presents opportunities as well as challenges to Public Relations practitioners across cultures. As stated in the definitions for Public Relations above, organisations engage in dialogic interactions with their stakeholders. Through Web 2.0 technology and the principle of spontaneity, social media provides opportunities for such interactions where users can quickly and spontaneously share their opinion on posts made by organisations in the form of comments, likes, and dislikes that serve as feedback to organisations (Bentley, 2008).

In Ghana's 2020 general election, the Electoral Commission registered 11 political parties and an independent candidate out of 25 political parties for the year's elections. Ghana's Electoral Commission listed the

National Democratic Congress, New Patriotic Party, All People's Party, Convention People's Party, Great Consolidated Popular Party, Ghana Freedom Party, Ghana Union Movement, Liberal Party of Ghana, National Democratic Party, People's National Convention, Progressive People's Party, and an independent candidate. Among these political parties were the two major political parties in Ghana, the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP), which have successfully won elections since the inception of the 1992 Constitution and have transferred power to each other.

The National Democratic Congress (NDC) is a social-democratic political party in Ghana founded by Jerry John Rawlings, who transitioned from a military ruler as head of state between 1981 and 1993 to a constitutionally elected president between 1993 and 2001. The party adopted the umbrella as its logo and symbol with a red, white, green, and black colour and a dove at its tip. The party's motto is 'Unity, stability, and development'. The NDC is also a member of the Progressive Alliance and Socialist International group that champions the principles and ideals of Social Democracy. Since the coming into being of the fourth republic, the NDC has participated and contested in all presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana (NDC, 2023).

The "New Patriotic Party (NPP) was founded on the 28th of July 1992 as a centre-right and liberal-conservative party in Ghana. The party adopted the African elephant and the red, white, and blue colours as its logo and symbol, and the party's motto is, "Development in Freedom" (NPP, 2023). The New Patriotic Party has its history rooted in the United Gold Coast Convention, which was part of Ghana's independence struggle in the 1940s and 1950s, and eventually evolved into the United Party in the late 1950s, the Progress Party in the late 1960s, the Popular Front Party in the 1970s, and the All People's Party in the early 1980s. The New Patriotic Party has also contested every general election in Ghana since the coming into being of the fourth republic in 1992, except for the parliamentary elections of 1992 (NPP, 2023; Ghanaweb, 2022).

The NDC and NPP have been using manifestos, party paraphernalia, and organising political rallies during the general election since 1992. During the 2016 and 2020 general elections, the NDC and the NPP, aside from the traditional approach to electioneering campaigns, used social media handles, Facebook and Twitter, for their campaigns. This provides a new phase to the discourse on political communication in Ghana—an indication that they would have engaged the electorates in

dialogic forms using these platforms to win votes. The Internet and social media spaces are considered information sources (Westerman et al., 2014), where the public consumes critical decisions, such as voting. Dialogic Communication and engagements in these digital spaces encourage political parties as authors and speakers or content generators to have two-way and symmetrical conversations, participation, and collaborations with their audience/consumers. The dialogue process in this setting requires professionalism in engagement, calmness, decency, and openness with the audience or the public (Innes, 2007; Huisman et al., 2019). This study, therefore, contributes to the discourse of dialogic public engagements by analysing the social media pages of the NDC and NPP to ascertain how the principles of dialogic engagements or public relations are applied in their political engagements with electorates on social media.

### THE CHALLENGE OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND DIALOGIC ENGAGEMENT ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Numerous studies have been conducted around political communication, specifically on the use of new media in Africa (Oparaugo, 2021; Robinson, 2019; Mutsvairo & Karam, 2018; Gadjanova et al., 2019; Ahmad et al., 2019). Some of the new political communication approaches by political parties promote the use of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation, as well as hate speeches in their content dissemination, which is unethical and unprofessional (Ecker & Ang, 2019; Jerit & Zhao, 2020). Since the online world is now a space for content consumption, most political parties spend more resources on their social media content and audiences.

In Ghana, Nigeria, and other places, it is argued that social media usage is high among the youth for political participation through Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Yahoo Messenger (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020). Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) assert that several benefits of using social media for political participation include allowing the electorate to participate actively and get involved in the political discourse by adding their voices, expectations, and knowledge on issues posted on social media sites through political giants. For example, Smith's (2009) report on the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project established that social media platforms such as blogs, social networking sites, and video-sharing sites played a vital role in the United States of America's 2008 elections because Americans got information

about candidates and campaign messages through using the platforms. Social media users get their news and campaign messages from these media during the election years. However, they also post their thoughts and comments, allowing them to be active citizens in the political process. Likewise, scholars like Archana (2018), Tomić and Grbavac (2016), and Kiouisis and Strömbäck (2014) studied how government institutions conduct public relations. For instance, Tomić and Grbavac (2016) examine media and information management under Political PR. They analysed several spin techniques of government PR and revealed the signs of manipulation of political claims. They further showed that such manipulation is acceptable since it is in the interest of the government and the public. Kiouisis and Strömbäck (2014) discuss political public relations domains in news management and agenda building, issue management, event management, crisis management, assessment in political PR, and digital communication.

It is evident from the studies discussed above that little consideration has been given to how social media has been used in contemporary times to meet the demands of electronic communications, to ascertain how dialogic these social media platforms are, and to understand how they impact elections, particularly the 2020 general elections campaign of the NDC and NPP. More attention must be given to understanding the dialogic nature of social media accounts of political parties and issues of electronic communication by the NDC and NPP. We, therefore, set out to thoroughly examine how the two dominant political parties, the NPP and NDC, use and engage their audience on social media during Ghana's 2020 general elections. Most importantly, we examine how these accounts engage with their followers and how social media contributes to the communication efforts by the NDC and the NPP in budding and thriving democracy like Ghana.

## THE CONCEPT OF DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

The Institute of Public Relations, Ghana (IPR-Ghana), incorporated issues of ethics, truthfulness, and disclosure of complete information in defining Public Relations (PR). It considers PR as:

The distinctive and strategic management art and social science function, based on an understanding of human behaviour that identifies issues of criti-

cal relevance, analyses trends and predicts their consequences and establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships based on truth, complete information, reliable performance and the public interest. (IPR-Ghana cited in Kuranchie, 2017, n.p.)

Dialogic Public Relations has been given attention in the Public Relations field, which advocates for collaborative engagements with the public and a shift from propaganda, manipulation, and one-way communication, which often defined the Public Relations practice (Theunissen & Noordin, 2012). Several studies have examined the dialogic nature of Public Relations (Eray, 2016; Madichie & Hinson, 2014). Eray (2016) discussed how dialogic corporate organisations in Turkey are and how that defines their Public Relations practice. The study revealed that the communication practices of the sampled corporate organisations needed to be more dialogic in how they used their websites and social media pages to interact with their public since it defied the principles of Dialogic Communications, as posited by Kent and Taylor (1998). Madichie and Hinson (2014) explored the dialogic nature of the websites of the police forces in some sampled African countries. They found that only 16 of 56 countries had websites, and even fewer had active and vibrant websites. Also, very minimal dialogic elements were present on these websites under study. These policy forces could have employed technological strategies to make the websites highly dialogic.

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Stakeholder engagement shares some commonalities with the concept of dialogue. Stakeholder engagement shifts from organisations thinking of satisfying the needs of only their shareholders to engaging individuals or groups with a particular interest in the organisation's activities (Cornelissen, 2014). Many other studies, such as Bonsón et al. (2015) and Bonsón and Ratkai (2013), also explored social media and stakeholder campaigns. For instance, Bonsón et al. (2015) sought to understand how Spanish hotels employ social media to engage with their stakeholders. Their study was underpinned by a set of measuring metrics proposed by Bonsón and Ratkai (2013) to measure engagement activities on social media platforms. Bonsón and Ratkai's (2013) core pillars under the metrics are Popularity, which is determined by the number of times a social media post is liked;

Commitment, which talks about the quantum of comments a post receives; and finally, Virality, which focuses on how viral a social media post goes, and that is determined by the number of re-shares. Bonsón et al. (2015) analysed content from social media platforms of about 109 hotel chains in Spain and found that stakeholder engagement activities were essentially high with smaller hotels rather than the big ones. The study concluded that social media has the propensity to boost stakeholder engagement and ensure that social media campaign is effective, relevant, reliable, and well received.

Controlled networking activities characterise social media as a web-based service of the Internet, user's profile visibility with deliberative discussion, and sharing information by those within the various social media network systems (Ahmad & Popa, 2014). Ahmad and Popa (2014) asserts that adapting to the Internet has dramatically impacted politics, political marketing, and campaigning. Ahmad's (2014) study focused on social media adaptation by political actors and organisations to knowledge co-production and political marketing. The co-production and marketing processes online emphasise the dialogic engagement process of actors or stakeholders. The study revealed that the adoption and use of the Internet and social media had been accounted for in producing and generating the operational or rudimentary-conceptual or established-conceptual knowledge of political marketing. Gadjanova et al. (2019) revealed the mixed impact of social media on politics in Ghana by showing development issues and sharing campaign messages online for users.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theory that informs this research is Dialogic Communication or Public Relations Theory. Kent and Chen describe the Dialogic Public Relations Theory as "a shift away from the individualist, mass communication, orientation of public relations, which involved one-way and two-way messaging to stakeholders and publics, such as is found in the four models of the 'symmetrical' approach to public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984), to an interpersonal, relational, public centred, rhetorical approach to public relations" (2017, p. 2). It is based on the idea that public relations should not simply be a one-way communication process where organisations push their messages out to the public. Instead, it should be a more collaborative and interactive process where stakeholders are actively involved in communication for an enriched plurality of issues. Political

parties sustain their operations by speaking to the masses in the community through face to face or mass media and engaging them on social media platforms. This theory explains how the principles of dialogue and dialogic engagements are upheld by political parties in their social media engagements with electorates.

For dialogic engagement to be effective, Kent and Taylor (1998) argue that there should be a dialogic loop that allows the public to give and receive real-time feedback from the NPP and the NDC as organisations. Again, the information provided by the organisation, authors, or speakers should be useful and clear and should carry the values, cultures, purpose, mission, etc., for the audience to benefit from. It further argues for adopting the generation of return visits principle if the dialogic concept is to be achieved. Providing critical and valuable information, attractive and relevant content, a message, constant updates, and technology simplicity are attractive points for the public to return to after their visits. Ease of use of various platforms (social media and the Internet) for faster navigation and utilisation, as well as retaining users to consume the content constantly, remains an essential principle of the dialogic model (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The theory's focus allows for the dialogic engagement of the political parties on social media platforms with their followers using the chat and message exchange mediums, the 24-hour contact icons, and the question-and-answer sessions provided to keep their audience glued to their pages with relevant content.

### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The data for this study was collected from Facebook and Twitter by analysing the comments and interactions on the pages of the two parties. These two platforms are popular digital platforms for dialogic engagements for political and social movement activities. Using content analysis and cyber ethnography, we observed the relationship of the NDC and the NPP with the Ghanaian electorate on their Facebook and Twitter pages. It made sense of the choice of language and the nature of interactions on the platforms and attempted to explain how dialogic these interactions are. The research also probed the types of campaign messages shared for electorates' consumption, how quickly and efficiently they interact with the voters, and, in general, the dialogic elements present on the platform.

Frankel and Wallen (2003) argued that data analysis is a task that involves synthesising all the information a researcher gathers in the field

and drawing parallel and logical lines in the data according to the researcher's set of research questions. In this research, the analytical strategy employed is thematic analysis—an “interpretive process, whereby data is systematically searched to identify patterns within the data to provide an illuminating description of the phenomenon” (Smith & Firth, 2011, p. 3). This research had specific codes appropriated from the dialogic framework during the cyber observation, and other themes, such as page replies, dialogue avenues, and response time, were deduced. We employed thematic analysis to identify recurring common patterns. We offered detailed descriptions of the codes, including the dialogic nature of engagement, promotion of campaigns on social media, rule of conservation of visitors, user friendliness and generation of return visits, and others. After that, the task of reducing the bulk data on the NDC and NPP's Facebook and Twitter accounts into themes started. A detailed data description followed, identifying key themes on the page. In gathering data from the NDC and NPP's Facebook and Twitter accounts, the researcher had to visit the page multiple times, spending an average of one hour at each instant and repeating the same data collection process over one week. This was to help the researcher gain information that captures every page aspect and prevent them from losing track of any post or comment that they may skip.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### *Dialogic Nature of Engagements on Twitter and Facebook*

The analysis was performed using the five themes from Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic framework: the dialogic loop, the usefulness of the information, the generation of return visits, the ease of the interface, and the rule of conservation of visitors. The framework claims that an Internet platform is dialogic when a sound dialogic loop facilitates information exchange, thus, sending and receiving feedback, where the response should be in real time. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter allow timely information sharing and feedback.

After examining the NDC and NPP's Facebook and Twitter pages for this chapter, we identified various mediums for feedback. These feedback sessions were in contact number provision, instant messaging platform, and email, where the audience can send messages for redress. These features allow the Ghanaian electorate to send and receive notifications and vice versa. Facebook and Twitter enable visitors to like, reply, comment, or

share and receive likes, replies, comments, or shares through responses from the page administrators. The study found not less than 1576 and 8254 comments from NDC's Twitter and Facebook pages, of which three comments on Twitter received feedback while two statements on Facebook also received a response from the NDC page. The NPP also had 877 comments on Twitter and 12,869 comments on Facebook from their campaign information shared, of which the page responded to 64 comments with a 'like' but no response from them on Twitter comments (Table 7.1). This indicates partial usage of the dialogic loop by comparing the number of comments on campaign posts from the pages to responses to comments from the pages. Hinson et al. (2012) argue that the most significant concern in the dialogue discussion is the dialogic loop because it emphasises how interactive an organisation is with the public. It also displays the importance of the publics in relationship building since Public Relations aims for mutually beneficial relationships between the corporation and the public (Harlow, 1976).

On the timely nature of the responses, the study found that replies to comments under campaign posts were within a day. This means it takes an average of 24 hours to receive a reply from the NDC and NPP pages. Because Facebook and Twitter allow prompt and immediate messaging, one would expect the pages of NDC and NPP to reduce the time one must wait for a reply. An additional concern espoused by the dialogic loop is the quality of the responses organisations will provide to the queries and opinions of their publics when they visit their social media platforms. The dialogic loop concept holds that more than merely responses are needed if they embody the spirit of relationship building. The responses from the NPP pages were 'likes', which shows support from the page. At the same time, the NDC had messages and 'likes', which also indicate support or confirmation that both parties are incorporating relationship building. The NDC and the NPP, however, score relatively high in the dialogic loop

**Table 7.1** Engagements on the two parties' page

<i>Social media</i>	<i>Parties</i>	<i>Likes</i>	<i>Comments</i>	<i>Retweets/share</i>	
Twitter	NDC Twitter page	25,749	4115	1576	
	NPP Twitter page	19,842	877	3665	
Facebook	Parties	Comments	Normal likes	Dislikes	Share
	NDC Facebook page	48,651	8254	75	4702
	NPP Facebook page	72,690	12,869	130	9005

relative to the conclusions in Madichie and Hinson's (2014) study since, except for feedback, which is proportionately low to comments, every component under the concept is active. In analysing the NDC's Facebook and Twitter pages, the mission and vision statements of the party are observed to have been included on their social media handles. The pages also contained the party's logo, the party's address, and information about past and current events of the party.

Concerning the NPP's Facebook and Twitter pages, there is the presence of their mission, vision statements, and party logo. The pages also share past and current events of the party. A view of the pages, the party's calendar events, and the address can be located. This also aligns with Kent and Taylor's (2002) statement that organisations should be empathetic with their public by disclosing enough information in any interaction. On the generation of return visits and constant updates on their pages, it is evident that the page is regularly updated per Madichie and Hinson's (2014) measure of 30 days. Within the 62 days of review, the NPP Twitter and Facebook pages have posted fewer than 120 and 117 campaign messages, respectively. The NDC's Twitter and Facebook pages also posted 95 and 150 campaign messages, respectively. This shows a good representation within the 30 days that Madichie and Hinson (2014) measured.

On the user friendliness of the Internet and social media interface and access, the NPP and NDC pages were all in default design form for their Facebook and Twitter pages. From the observation of the pages, it is easy to navigate the NDC and NPP's Facebook and Twitter pages. The pages are designed so that the comment, like, and share buttons are noticeable for other publics to see and use if they wish to do so. The audience could navigate by clicking on the homepages, photos, about, media, tweets, replies, and gallery for the campaign messages during the period. The images on the pages were clear, and the font size and style were readable. Also, the concept echoes the loading time on the platform, arguing that visitors should spend very little time loading content on the platform. Evaluating this principle requires knowledge that the Facebook and Twitter page administrators generally do not control the content loading time. Therefore, responsibility cannot be carried on to the NDC and NPP pages.

The last concept in the dialogic framework is the rule of conservation of visitors. The concept argues that in dialogical communication on the Internet, organisations try to retain visitors on the page rather than sharing external links likely to lead them off the platform. On the rule of

conservation of visitors and keeping visitors on the NPP's Facebook and Twitter pages, the only external links shared were campaign message links from other news web pages. They also shared famous party personalities on those pages to create validity and constant engagements with their followers. These findings affirmed Ryan's (2003) postulation that engaging in ethical and trusted forms of communication on online platforms can make an organisation trustworthy in the eyes of its diverse publics.

### *General Content and Campaign Messages*

These messages created the needed engagements on the various platforms of the parties. Corruption, free senior high education, and the economy (Table 7.2) were the dominant issues of both parties to which their followers reacted through comments and likes. The 2020 election campaign messages centred around propaganda and how creative any of the parties could be by way of slogans and other catchy phrases to draw the attention of Ghanaians. While most of the voters are off social media platforms, the effort of the two parties to engage their loyal followers online appeared commendable.

### *Promotion of Campaigns on the Digital Platforms*

The themes that emerge from analysing the NDC and NPP's Twitter handles and Facebook pages are public education, media relations, audience targeting, and citizen feedback. As required in practising Public Relations, the NDC and the NPP aim to promote the image and reputation of their respective political parties and continuously sustain and improve the goodwill of their parties and their political leaders. How they undertake this PR activity is evident in both political parties' Twitter handles and Facebook pages. These PR activities are often laced with more propaganda and misinformation as they attempt to outwit one another in feeding and purveying information to the public. It was observed that both parties used paid advertising approaches, especially on Facebook, to boost their wider reach and target specific audiences.

In the case of the NDC Twitter page (Fig. 7.1), the image used as their display and cover pictures has the party's flagbearer and running mate, the party's colours, the party's emblem/logo, and the party's name with the simple message of a call to vote for the party and the flagbearer embedded.

**Table 7.2** Key messages of the two parties on the digital platform

<i>NPP</i>			<i>NDC</i>	
<i>Issues</i>	<i>Message</i>	<i>Engagements</i>	<i>Message</i>	<i>Engagements</i>
Education	Free SHS is here to stay. Let's go out and vote massively for Nana Akufo-Addo and the NPP to protect our progress and secure the future of our children	Comments = 6 Retweets = 32 Likes = 290	NDC to bring an end to the double track system in 2021 by completing all the community Day SHSs & include the now empty private SHSs in the free SHS policy	Comments = 18 Retweets = 43 Likes = 185
Economy	The BoG in cleaning up & strengthening the financial sector, revoked licenses of 9 banks, 23 S&L, & 386 microfinance companies. The central bank did this to protect the financial system and save the hard-earned monies of hardworking men and women	Comments = 1 Retweets = 28 Likes = 72	The NDC states that the Kyemu P3 Policy will be funded by the Annual Budget Funding Amount (ABFA) sourced from Ghana's petroleum revenues and not through loans to burden the debt stock as done by the NPP government	Comments = 2 Retweets = 21 Likes = 74
Corruption	On December 7, vote for a leader who is competent and not corrupt. Vote for a leader who delivers on his promises. Vote for the NPP	Comments = 3 Retweets = 22 Likes = 109	DC accuses President Akufo-Addo and his family for using fraudulent means through insurance guarantee and stole 1.5bn of Ghana's electricity bills	Comment = 15 Retweet = 26 Likes = 209

*(continued)*

Table 7.2 (continued)

<i>NPP</i>		<i>NDC</i>		
<i>Issues</i>	<i>Message</i>	<i>Engagements</i>	<i>Message</i>	<i>Engagements</i>
Health	Digitization in the health sector helped doctors and nurses deliver the best possible care to patients	Comments = 1 Retweets = 18 Likes = 113	The NDC promises to introduce free primary health care as a single social intervention under the 4th Republic)	Retweets = 45 Quote tweet = 4 Likes = 290



Fig. 7.1 NDC Twitter page

An observation of the page showed some level of dialogic engagement with followers like the NPP Twitter page (Fig. 7.2).

The NPP Twitter handle also has the flagbearer, the party colours and logo, and the position of the flagbearer on the ballot paper on the cover page and the display picture. These depictions represent the parties' brands with all the colours that resonate with their identity. Including the flagbearers on their cover page with the simple message of 'vote' and "#4MoreforNana" also promotes the campaign of the NDC and NPP, respectively.



Fig. 7.2 NPP Twitter page

This strategy of using party-branded colours, logos, and the image of the flagbearer and other prominent party officers creates publicity for the parties and their flagbearers. The consistency aspect of it also makes the hypodermic needle effect on the followers who, with time, turn to believe that everything on those pages is accurate. Without verbal communication of the parties' intent, the pictures, logos, and flagbearers communicate nonverbally to the online community about the political parties and their flagbearers with a clear message calling for more votes. This approach needs to be more dialogic; it only communicates information about the party and its flagbearer without an avenue for interactivity. This illustrates a Public Relations agenda that is more directed towards attaining only a favourable image for the NDC and NPP. Grunig and Hunt (1984) described this activity in their four models of public relations as a press agency model where Public Relations personnel are reduced into press officers and are predisposed to getting a favourable image for the organisation within the media space through any means necessary and without creating an avenue for feedback from their publics. Recent Public Relations definitions have emphasised maintaining mutuality between an organisation and its public, recognising that the organisation's survival is hinged on the existence and well-being of its people (Lattimore et al., 2009; Kuranchie, 2017).

However, the content the two parties (NDC and NPP) share on Twitter through tweets creates an avenue for the online community to interact with the Parties. The data on their Twitter handle show that the parties

have tweeted extensively to promote their party and their flagbearers in the lead-up to the election. These tweets were in the form of sharing images embedded with the parties' campaign messages, retweets from the flagbearers and party leadership, and sharing online news portals that were either in favour of or against each other. The tweets and retweets by the parties had the online community liking what had been tweeted, retweeting those messages, and replying to the content shared.

An analysis of the interactivity on the Twitter page suggests that the NDC and NPP Twitter handles have been dialogic, creating avenues for instantaneous audience feedback through likes, retweets, and replies. This can be situated within the two-way symmetric model of public relations, where the party communicates their political messages to their audiences and receives feedback through likes, retweets, and replies. Therefore, this creates an avenue for picking this feedback to remodel engagement strategies in the virtual community. The Facebook pages of NDC and NPP also have images that inform the public about the party's campaign message, the party's flagbearer, and the party's colours.

Media Relations is an essential component in practising Public Relations. As posited by Cornelissen (2014), creating and nurturing relationships with media practitioners is critical to the success of organisations since their coverage of events can directly influence how the public perceives the organisation. One of the ways social media is changing the public relations practice of the NDC and NPP during the 2020 campaign is that social media enabled the NDC and NPP to have unfettered access to an intuitive platform for general news and the dissemination of their campaign messages for party brand loyalty, an improved follower base, and audience satisfaction—a better understanding of the loyal audience needs and preferences. NDC and NPP's ability to easily target the Ghanaian youth who ordinarily would have had difficulty accessing information and campaign messages from the legacy media spaces makes the two parties and their online engagement a vital source and platform for information sharing through their following, as captured in Table 7.3. Following these pages, as in Table 7.3, indicates that members or followers support the party pages with their likes and are ready to consume the content produced on their newsfeeds. This enables the parties to create content that serves their interest as political parties. The data in Table 7.3 again show that the NPP has a more significant social media following than the NDC and will presumably have more online engagements with their followers than NDC.

**Table 7.3** Social Media Platforms of NDC and NPP and the number of followers

<i>Social media platforms</i>	<i>Followers</i>
NDC Twitter account	234.7 K
NPP Twitter account	267.1 K
NDC Facebook page	75 K
NPP Facebook page	498 K

## CONCLUSION

Social media has helped the NDC and NPP to solicit feedback through likes, replies, retweets, and comments from the public. This is yet another essential aspect of Public Relations. Facebook and Twitter have helped improve NDC and NPP's media relations during the 2020 campaign. The data and discussions showed that Facebook and Twitter helped the NDC and NPP disseminate their campaign messages promptly without using traditional media. The data also showed that with the help of Facebook and Twitter, NDC and NPP could easily segment and target their audiences. This is important for public relations practices because there is less dependency on the reachability of traditional media platforms. This aligns with several kinds of literature on digital Public Relations as they emphasise the timely nature of interactions and activities on social media. The dialogic engagements allow the parties to retain their following while providing them with content to consume.

In practising Public Relations, NPP and NDC get real-time feedback from the Ghanaian electorate through the help of social media for the 2020 elections. This means the old ways of soliciting feedback are now long in the tooth. The element of risk in the Dialogic Public Relations theory comes up here again. It emphasises an organisation's willingness to be vulnerable in interacting with the public, recognising their uniqueness, and such identity must be tolerated. NDC and NPP, as parties, constantly face an undue attack on the campaign messages they share as a form of responding to the content posted. Dialogic Public Relations allow the public to contribute their opinions and feedback in shaping general organisational strategies. Therefore, this study recommends that NDC and NPP social media pages should make efforts to reply to as many comments as possible to increase public engagement during campaigns and the daily engagement of the people. Future researchers can broaden the scope of this study by including other political parties in Ghana and beyond.

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