Web-based political interaction:
analysis of Ghana's political party websites in general elections

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Abstract: The purpose of this research was to discover the importance of websites as a tool used by political parties in Ghana to engage the public. The study was conducted ahead of two general elections in Ghana – 2012 and 2016. The theoretical framework hinged on Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic theory of public relations as well as the two-way symmetrical communication model based on modifications by Grunig (1992). Kent and Taylor (1998) identified four elements based on which the interactivity of websites can be analysed: 'dialogic loop', 'the usefulness of information', 'maintaining visitors', and 'ease of interface'. In addition, the two-way symmetrical communication model, which offers essential elements for effective interactions, is also used. The qualitative study applied content analysis and in-depth interviews for data collection. Six websites were content-analysed in both 2012 and 2016, while six officials of the political parties, who had responsibility over the websites or contributed to their operations, were interviewed only in 2012. The study found that political parties used the websites, first, to disseminate information about their activities and, second, to interact with their supporters and voters. Nonetheless, the majority of the websites had very little or no interactive features. The study concluded that the majority of political parties in Ghana used their website as platforms to merely disseminate information and not to interact with their supporters. Recommendations were made for further studies to be carried out to find out the impact of websites on the campaign activities of political parties as well as the views of users of political party websites and other Internet resources.

1.   Introduction

Internet-based communication is a vital tool for all forms of campaigns, be they political or otherwise, and political party campaigns are very much a part of all multi-party democracies such as Ghana. It is for this reason that political candidates and voters are increasingly turning to the Internet to transmit and receive information (Williams 2006). Studies that have focused on the developments in Internet resources for the last two decades point to the fact that political discourse on virtual platforms is a convenient means of reaching out to the public sphere. The implications of using such platforms for deliberations have not been fully unravelled in young democracies with limited access to Internet resources; hence the need to study the phenomenon, especially, in 'democratising' nations, where digital media are providing many with the first real opportunities citizens have had for political deliberation in many cases (Mutz 2008).

The Federal Networking Council (cited in Wood and Smith 2001: 32) states that the Internet can be defined by how it "…allows for public and private communication." The United States' Defense Department created an experimental network called the Advanced Research Projects Agency network (ARPAnet) in the 1960s to advance a new generation of computer interconnections and data sharing. The ARPAnet subsequently became very popular among research and educational institutions and was used for sending and receiving data from various points.

As organisations position themselves to take advantage of the opportunities that the Internet brings, political parties are seemingly taking advantage of it to outwit each other. Gibson and Ward (2000) contend that political parties are keen to leverage the Internet to build and enhance their network of grassroots activists. In the US, studies show that there is a growing preference for performing political activities online and that news, in particular, is well received through email (Bennett 2008).

According to Hendricks and Denton (2010), former US President, Bill Clinton's campaign in 1992 was the first to extensively use the Internet, although it was limited to email and LISTSERV

distribution of information. Later in 1994, political parties started using websites during the US congressional elections. Some of the candidates in that election, according to Gibson and Ward (2000), created websites (a phenomenon which was popular among businesses at the time) to project their campaigns. Norris (2001) asserts that, as of the middle of 2000, there were about 1,250 parties from 179 countries on the Internet. This meant that many more political parties had taken advantage of the website for communication purposes as opposed to what had applied at its inception. In North America and Europe, there were over eighty parties which had created websites within the same period. Thus, by the end of 2000, it was becoming quite unusual for a party not to have a web presence (Davis 1999).

For instance, according to Bimber and Copeland (2013) in the 2008 and 2012 elections in the US, digital media created hitherto unknown avenues for engaging audiences using the tenets of interactivity to exchange virtual messages with them. Globally, the adoption of Internet-based digital platforms for achieving communication goals is still changing rapidly due to the advancement in technology and approaches to political campaigns. In the United Kingdom, researchers opine that websites can improve poor communication between political parties and users but this can only be effective if the websites are given the necessary attention by the political parties (Webcredible 2010).

1.1 Ghana's political parties and the Internet

Prior to the promulgation of Ghana's 1992 Republican Constitution, the military junta under the leadership of Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings had placed a permanent ban on political party activities across the country, while also clamping down on private media (Ninsin 1993). But after several agitations by citizens, the government returned the country to a multi-party democratic system with the 1992 Republican Constitution. The constitution ushered Ghana into an era of constitutional multi-party democracy, coupled with the liberalisation of the airwaves. From 1992, about thirty political parties have been formed to contest in both parliamentary and presidential elections (www.ec.gov.gh).

Africans generally make use of mobile phones for a range of activities including social networking as well as interacting with their governments (Murray 2012). This function of mobile technology enables the literate to access Internet resources such as websites, online portals and social networking sites. Also, users on the African continent are more likely to be presented with various forms of political information through adverts, releases and posts due to the peculiarities of Internet infrastructure and accessibility constraints (Osiakwan and Zuckerman 2007).

Despite the advent of internet-enabled mobile telephony, electronic and print media continue to be major communication outlets used by the political parties in Ghana to disseminate messages but, more and more, candidates and political groups are realising the importance of the Internet in their quest to win political power by bridging the communication gap between the public and the party's ideals (Ward & Gibson 2008).

Three decades ago, Coxall (1980: 37) argued that: "parties aggregate a vast range of disparate ideas and interests into a cohesive set of political demands; they provide direction and order to government…" The cohesive set of political demands are put together into cogent messages to attract supporters. Norris (2001) supported this view by positing that new media platforms such as websites and social media have further given political parties an additional avenue for sharing information with their support base, interacting with the public. While the majority of Ghana's political groupings remain conservative in their interactions with the public, due to fear that they may lose control of messages to the wider public, there is growing demand among young adults for a progressive change that incorporates more participatory communication tenets in political organisations (Stromer-Galley 2000). This type of demand from young voters was a prevalent feature in the 2004 and 2008 Ghanaian elections.

Rommele (2003) explains that the political party's role in the political process hinges on

communication, which he divides into three key activities: opinion formation, interest mediation, and organisation. A critical aspect of a political party's operation is its communication functions. In order to adequately organise its followers and sympathisers, a political party must allow members or followers to make input into their activities. These opinions may be varied and must therefore be managed in order not to create discord. In other words, parties are a vital medium of communication between the electorate and political leaders (Taylor and Kent 2004).

Gibson and Ward (2000: 5) stated that: "Arrival of the Internet and other new ICT's in the mid-1990s appeared to offer parties a range of new communication possibilities at just the right time". In addition, the manner in which political parties interact with voters has changed, with diminishing focus on traditional mass media. Rommele (2003), in a study on party communication with new ICT resources in the US, identified a phenomenon known as 'vote maximization' as a primary goal of any political party. Rommele averred that the process of maximising votes is characterised by a horizontal approach to communication, which includes the use of the Internet. Advocates of Internet-based communication hold the view that the Internet could provide new forms of horizontal communication with the capacity, among others, to:

- broaden the range of pluralistic voices heard in the public sphere.
- facilitate new forms of interactivity and deliberation.
- widen the pool of political participants.

Over the past decade and a half, web communication in Ghana has transformed into a platform for citizen journalism and advocacy campaigns, on the one hand, as well as becoming a negative tool for manipulating political elections and fake news, on the other hand, as is the case in the United States and other developed democracies. It remains to be seen whether the negative impact of Internet-enabled communication is symptomatic only of developed democratic society or all open societies. Schneider & Foot (2006) contend that political parties that use the Internet for electioneering are more likely to inform than embrace interaction. Lilleker & Jackson (2011) disagree and argue that political groups are more inclined to share information about their activities with the public, and show little interest in an interactive process.

Chadwick (2012) noted that websites will boost aspects of political interactivity if utilised with a defined strategy. The Internet is expected to be the platform that bridges the gap between individuals who require information for decision-making and the sources of such information. Lilleker and Jackson (2011) had previously made this point by stating that the Internet will regenerate conversations and interpersonal networking, which are essential in political communication.

1.2 Problem statement

There is ample mass media research showing how the Internet has helped political groups around the world to organise their members around activities in a bid to win elections. These studies have, however, concentrated mainly on developed countries and the use of Internet resources. Even though there is research on how Ghanaians use the Internet and the related characteristics, there is very little, or no, research on how political parties use websites and their rationale for using it. In today's fast-paced digital environment, a political party is bound to reach a wide audience online with messages that support their campaigns. Even though traditional media outlets remain useful in the electioneering process, studies have shown that they have lost some ground to the digital media space. A thorough study of the use of websites by political parties in Ghana will be useful to unravel the rationale behind their use and the peculiar challenges encountered. This can provide greater insight into the nuances of political communication on the continent and the role of new media in bridging the information gap between politicians and citizens in Africa.

1.3 Research objective
The study sought to establish the role played by political party websites in presidential elections in Ghana.

1.3.1 Sub-objectives
    1. Examine the core functions of political party websites in Ghana.
    2. Establish whether the concept of interactivity is a key reason for a website's establishment.
    3. In what respect do audiences participate in political discourse via websites?

1.4 Research questions
    1. To what extent do political parties' websites in Ghana have dialogic features?
    2. To what extent do political parties utilise interactive features to communicate with their members, sympathisers and voters?
    3. What ways do political parties incorporate the views and contributions of their website visitors into their campaigns?
    4. How do political parties in Ghana differ in their use of websites for political campaigns?

2. Literature review

Several research works have been undertaken to explore organisations' uses of websites for the purpose of public relations. For the purposes of this study, related research materials reviewed have focused primarily on the use of websites by political parties. The literature reviewed for the study focused on how websites reflected the dialogic features propounded by Kent and Taylor (1998), and served the anticipated needs of users. Other studies explored the user-friendly capabilities of political parties' or candidates' websites. It is critical to note, due to the scanty research on this area in Ghana, that most of the literature is based on studies from Europe and the United States of America.

Bimber et al. (2015: 22) studied political interest as an important moderator of the relationship between the use of Internet resources and traditional forms of political participation. The study examined British election studies data from 2001, 2005, and 2010 and found that "digital media use is positively and consistently associated with political talk for those lower in political interest".

In a study, Marcinowski et al. (2014: 152) found that individual attitudes and subjective assessments of the value of the Internet in a state-level German election was an important aspect of the public elections' process. Applying the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the study examined patterns of web campaign activity among candidates in the election. The findings revealed that there is a "…large discrepancy between the intention to use web campaigning and actual adoption" by users.

Bakker and Vreese (2011: 1) tested the relationships between use of newspaper, television, and Internet as well as offline and online forms of political participation. A national survey conducted with a sample size of 2,409, among participants aged 16 to 21, revealed that a variety of Internet uses have a positive correlation with different forms of political participation. Even though the relationship between most uses of traditional media and participation was weak, there was nonetheless a positive relationship. The study further affirmed how a wider and "…more contemporary conception of political participation, together with more detailed measures of media use" can provide greater insight into roles that the media can play in affecting participatory behaviour among the Internet generation.

Meanwhile, Mudhai et al. (2009) argued that while the use of Internet resources by key political parties and presidential candidates has intensified in recent Kenyan presidential elections, the controversial December 2007 poll laid bare the limits of technology's role in democracy. While the web may have some potential to help monitor and mobilise political activity and possibly encourage political engagement, it may also reinforce the positions of those in power due not only to their

limitations but also to the ability of human agents to manipulate online content to suit their interests.

Hooghe and Teepe (2007) analysed the log files of 2003 and 2004 Belgian non-partisan party profile websites (PPWs). The analysis revealed that PPW users were usually highly educated young males. It was however inconclusive on the party and policy preferences of users who visit the websites on the day before the elections, or those who use the websites up to forty days before the elections. It found that users respond to policy questions on interactive websites and their answers are used to calculate the distance between their own preferences and party agendas.

Pirannejad (2011) conducted a study on the impact of ICT on political development in Iran. The study investigated how political communication has changed to meet the specific needs of modern society. According to the researcher, improving political information and people's awareness, as well as conscientising people for effective political engagement and participation are all made easier with Internet resources in advanced societies within developing states.

Employing grounded theory and narrative inquiry, the study used a qualitative approach to collect and analyse the data. The study concluded that the Internet and political party websites have played a significant role in empowering citizens and those politically active in society. The majority of respondents were of the view that Internet resources such as websites were very useful in the political space. Conversely, the political discourse takes a nosedive on such platforms once the elections are over.

A study by Gibson et al. (2003) tested assorted variables pertaining to political party websites in the developed world. The study was conducted in the United States of America (a presidential democracy) and the United Kingdom (a parliamentary democracy). The study investigated two central questions: (1) Do ideologically divergent parties differ in terms of how they use the web as a campaign tool? and (2) Does the web promote a more balanced or equalised exposure for party messages than other media? The researchers used interactivity as the conceptual framework for the study. A combination of data collected from administered questionnaires, content analysis of sites and other online media coverage of the election were used to investigate the research questions. The study found that high volumes, and speed of transmission of the information, could provide a more substantive basis for campaigning than other forms of media.

Additionally, the interactive components of technology in the form of chat-rooms and emails enabled voter participation. The parties could utilise the two-way communication possibilities to gather immediate feedback on their policies. There was also a difference in the use of websites between the two countries. For example, while online fundraising has become prominent in the USA, it was less developed in the UK. The functions on the websites were grouped thematically into:

- Information Provision (how much information is on the site and how useful the information is).
- Resource Generation (whether the site is used to generate funds and to mobilise resources for the party).
- Participation (sending and receiving emails together with other feedback and interaction).

Norris (2003) suggested that party websites play a distinctive role in two respects:

- Party websites function as a pluralistic civic forum by facilitating the voice of oppositional challengers and increasing the visibility of minor and fringe parties, so that attentive citizens can learn more about the variety of electoral choices; and
- Party websites function as a channel for political participation by facilitating interactive links between citizens and parties.

The study, described as a "supply (the websites)" and "demand (uses by the party)", focused on the relationship between website information providers and the preferences of users. Norris (2003) stated that, compared to traditional mediated channels, substantial evidence is presented that party websites play a distinctive role in the process of political communications.

2.1 Theoretical framework

2.1.1 Two-way symmetrical model

Scholars such as Guth and Marsh (2000) and Cutlip et al. (2006) have stated that quite a number of organisations practise the two-way symmetrical models in public relations practice, as proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and modified by Grunig (1992). In this study, the two-way symmetrical model formed the theoretical framework on which the study was designed. The two-way communication process was an adaptation of Lee Thayer's concept of 'diachronic communication', propounded in 1968. Lee Thayer explained diachronic communication as the process of discussing "…a state of affairs that benefits both the organisation and the public" (Grunig 1992: 287). Two-way symmetrical communication provides organisations and public relations practitioners with a way of describing and explaining how and why contemporary public relations are practised as they are.

According to Grunig (1992), the two-way symmetrical communication model relies heavily on some core factors:

- Reliance on honest and open two-way communication and mutual give-and-take rather than one-way persuasion.
- Focus on mutual respect and efforts to achieve mutual understanding.
- Negotiation and a willingness to adapt and make compromises.
- The need for organisations engaging in public relations to be willing to make significant adjustments in how they operate to accommodate their public.

Websites provide new opportunities for two-way symmetrical communication in public relations. Lee and Park (2010) assert that websites allow organisations to communicate directly with the public, customers and prospects, as well as sharing mutually beneficial information without the constraints of relying solely on traditional media.

While dialogue is encouraged online, the feedback element might be lost if conscious efforts are not made to elicit reactions from the target audience. McQuail and Windahl (1993) state that the two-way symmetrical model depicts a communication relationship where the sender/source and the receiver/public share initiative and power equally. In support of this position, Guth and Marsh (2000: 251) posited that this model "focuses on two-way communications as a means of conflict resolution and the promotion of mutual understanding between an organisation and its important publics".

2.1.2 Dialogic theory of public relations

The theologian, Martin Buber (1958: 93), who defines dialogue as "a relationship between persons that is characterised by the element of inclusion", is credited with giving life to the dialogic theory. A decade after, Buber (1967:7) explained that there are two types of relationships: "an 'I-it' relationship, which is one-way oriented as the name suggests, and an 'I-thou' relationship which deals with a two-way process of interaction".

Buber (1996) later added that the dialogic theory acknowledges the presence of the "other individual" or an event experienced between two persons who have mutual respect for the views of the other. He explained that the basic element underlining the 'I-thou' concept of dialogue can be described as a relationship where both parties treat each other with mutual respect and courtesy. The dialogic theory also takes its roots from James Grunig's two-way symmetrical model which has come

to be accepted as the most ethical way to conduct public relations (Cutlip, Centre & Broom 2006).

Kent and Taylor (2002) also suggest that the concept of dialogue as a public relations theory must be credited to Scott R. Pearson. The concept was further expanded by researchers such as Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002), McAllister-Spooner and Taylor (2008) and others. Park and Reber (2008: 409) indicate that "using technology itself does not contribute to building and maintaining good relationships between organisations and their publics." Rather, how the technology is used with an understanding of how the dialogic process works will make it more useful to the audience.

Prior to this, Kent and Taylor (1998) had provided four frameworks which can be used to assess the effectiveness of a website. They are the 'dialogic loop', 'the usefulness of information', 'maintaining visitors', and 'ease of interface'.

1. **The dialogic loop:** An important benefit of websites is that they allow feedback. Kent and Taylor (1998) expound that the use of emails and comment boxes are essential for dialogic communication to be effective.
2. **The usefulness of information:** Kent and Taylor (1998) explain that the 'usefulness of information' examines how information is used on websites.
3. **Maintaining your visitors/generation of return visits:** This refers to features that encourage repeated visits to create a captive audience. Kent and Taylor (1998: 326) posit that organisations that often updated their websites appear "credible and suggest that the organisation is responsible".
4. **Ease of interface:** Ease of interface refers to how easily accessible information contained on the website is. Websites need to offer easily accessible information that contains information that would be valued by site visitors.

2.2 Research design

The study was based principally on a qualitative content analysis of political party websites and in-depth interviews with officials of six political parties who have direct responsibility over the websites. The study was conducted during two general elections in Ghana – 2012 and 2016. There was an initial major data collection from 1 August to 5 December 2012 that sought to answer all the research questions presented in the study. This was followed by a limited scope of data collection from 1 to 30 November 2016. Information on the websites was content-analysed and measured using Kent and Taylor's (1998) indicators to measure the dialogic capabilities of a website, which have been detailed in the theoretical framework:

1. Ease of Interface
2. Usefulness of Information
3. Maintaining Visitors
4. Dialogic Loop.

A qualitative study of this kind requires that codes are defined adequately to reduce the risk of deviation and incongruent data collection (Babbie 2009; Hsieh and Shannon 2005). To ensure the same measuring tool to analyse the time it takes for each website to load, the researcher selected the Vodafone Internet Café located in Osu, Ghana, which has a bandwidth of at least 1 megabyte per second (1mb/s). A user can download a 700-megabyte file in twenty-five minutes. This, therefore, makes the Internet speed faster than the average broadband Internet service in the capital of Ghana, which has an average download speed of 389 kb/s (Testmy.net, n.d.).

This study also used a semi-structured interview guide to conduct an in-depth interview in the English language. Even though the population of thirteen active political parties registered by Ghana's Electoral Commission, as of June 2012, had some form of Internet presence (websites,

Facebook and Twitter pages), only six (6) had websites. For the purposes of this study, the unit of analysis is the website; hence the selection of the six political party websites as the sample.

2.2.1 Sample
Since the research was focused on the websites of political parties in Ghana, all the political parties with websites formed the sample for the study. The sample size was therefore six. In selecting the sample, the purposive sampling technique was used to select the political parties and their websites because they formed the basis for the research. There was a need to interview individuals who had ample knowledge on the set up and use of the website for their respective parties. Six websites belonging to political parties that were analysed in both 2012 and 2016 were:

1. National Democratic Congress (NDC) – http://www.ndc.org.gh
2. New Patriotic Party (NPP) – http://www.thenewpatrioticparty.org/
3. Progressive People's Party (PPP) – http://www.pppghana.org
4. Convention People's Party (CPP) – http://www.conventionpeoplesparty.org
5. Great Consolidated Popular Party (GCPP) – http://greatconsolidatedpopularparty.org
6. People's National Convention (PNC) – http://www.hassanayariga.com

In addition, officials responsible for communications and public affairs were interviewed in 2012. They were selected based on their roles as spokespersons of the parties and managers of their communication platforms. The following officials were therefore interviewed in 2012:

1. Deputy Communications Director of the NPP
2. Propaganda Secretary of the NDC
3. National Secretary of the PPP
4. Deputy Communications Director of the CPP
5. National Executive Member of the PNC
6. Flagbearer of the GCPP.

3. Findings and discussion
The study set out to establish the role of websites – critical or negligible – in Ghana's presidential elections in 2012 and 2016. Aside the main objective of the research, the study also sought to:

- Examine the core functions of political party websites in Ghana.
- Establish whether the concept of interactivity is a key reason for its establishment.
- In what respect do audiences participate in political discourse via the websites?

The findings from the data collected have been analysed and grouped under the four principles from Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic principle for relationship-building.

1. Ease of interface
2. Usefulness of information
3. Maintaining visitors
4. Dialogic loop.

The afore-stated principles were used as the codes, based on which the contents of the websites were examined. The responses from the in-depth interview were also analysed based on the codes.

3.1 *Ease of interface*

This refers to the ease with which a visitor peruses a site and how easy it is for the user to access information. The principle of Ease of Interface was assessed with the following indicators:

- Availability of site maps on homepages.
- Easy identification of site maps on homepages.
- The incorporation of search engines on homepages to help site visitors search for information on the website.
- Easy identification of major links to the rest of the sites on the homepages.

The findings from 2012 revealed that none of the six websites had site maps on their homepages. The websites however had clearly marked sections that made it possible for a new user to locate specific information. In November 2016, the situation had changed markedly. Five out of the six websites had sitemaps and very visible menus to guide users. According to Thelwall (2009), a site map is essential because it provides people with the exact location where they can find specific information they need. Thelwall (2009: 23) defines a site map as a "visually or textually organized template of a website's content that allows the users to surf through the site to find the information they are looking for".

In 2012, the websites of the NPP and PPP had more advanced menus on the homepage that facilitated the search of information. The NPP official interviewed played a role in the design of the website. He stated:

> We already have specific links to the rest of the site, which make it easy to identify what our supporters want. We have not had any complaints about the ease or otherwise of the websites but as a human institution, if we realise that it is a necessity, we will have [to improve the site] for our visitors.

For both periods during which data was collected for the study, all websites contained detailed information on the history of the political parties. These included party profiles, mission and goals as well as information on key figures in the parties, especially the flagbearers of each party. The NPP and the NDC were miles ahead of the others with updated information activities of their parties. Apart from targeting their supporters or potential supporters, these two parties also reached out to the media with kits such as press releases, statements, videos and well-edited pictures. Margolis and Resnick (2000) insisted that political parties using Internet resources must ensure that users have all basic information about the activities of the party in order to establish trust.

In 2012, three of the websites – NDC, NPP and the CPP – had search engines that allowed visitors to search for specific information on the site but, in 2016, only the NDC maintained this capability on the website. The others had no tool that allowed visitors to search for specific information on the page. A search engine is a box on the website's homepage that allows visitors to search for information on the website by typing a request in the box. The GCPP official interviewed argued that:

> The website does not need any other search box. It has been designed in such a way that it can allow users to find whatever they need. Even though it may be essential, it does not affect the effectiveness of the site. What is important is the kind of information I put on the site for Ghanaians who care to visit it.

3.2 Usefulness of information
Kent and Taylor (1998) defined this principle as the importance or usefulness of the information provided by the websites. Web users are more inclined to visit sources that can guarantee the quality of the information and to gratify their interests (Bennett, 2008). The indicators for analysing the findings were:

- Presence of updated information
- Availability of downloadable information
- Availability of statements on their philosophy
- News stories posted on the websites within the last 30 days.

In 2012, two of the websites belonging to the NPP and NDC had regular updates on party news or campaign promises. The situation was no different in 2016 even though the PPP had increased the amount of information posted on the site within the period the data was collected. Some of the other political parties, in both periods of data collection, had information about activities that were more than a year old. Explaining how often their website is updated with information, the PPP's official averred that the party puts a higher premium on updating its social media platforms than its website:

> Dr. Nduom [the flagbearer of the PPP in both 2012 and 2016] is constantly having a conversation with his supporters on Facebook and twitter. There is something to discuss on Facebook every time so we try to update it…We are constantly engaging Ghanaians. I can say that Dr. Nduom has become the most popular face today because he is everywhere on the Internet every day.

All the political parties had their mission statements and philosophy on the site. Out of six websites, two – NPP and NDC – had posted news stories within seven days of the content analysis. The official of the PNC concurred with the PPP official and explained that one of the reasons why the party does not frequently update its website is because of the advent of social media:

> These days, it has become pertinent to rely on Facebook and other forms of social media…We constantly change our information on our Facebook wall.

The NPP, NDC and CPP update their websites at least once a week. Taylor and Kent (2004) attributed the regular use of websites to the updates that engage users on these platforms.
Three websites – NPP, NDC and CPP – allowed visitors to download information from the site. The documents that could be downloaded were in 'pdf' formats and pictures. The video and audio materials could not be downloaded directly because the files were hosted on video streaming sites – YouTube and Vimeo. The video streaming sites, however, allow visitors to download the files using third party software. It was evident from the interviews that the political parties that had download capabilities on the websites wanted visitors to own copies of the documents, which can be used even when Internet access is a challenge. The NPP's official explained:

> We encourage our supporters to preach the 'good news' of the party so what happens if your supporter needs certain information on the website and cannot access it because the Internet is down? Internet is critical but it is not always reliable in our part of the world so there is a need to provide information that can be used everywhere.

3.3 Maintaining visitors

According to Kent and Taylor (1998), the principle of 'Maintaining Visitors' refers to the way organisations incorporate features on their websites to encourage web users to stay put without straying off to other platforms. The indicators used in analysing the above principle were:

- A clear posting of the date and time the site was last updated.
- Appeals to visitors with explicit statements inviting them to return to their sites.
- Inclusion of calendars of events on websites.

The study found that apart from the websites of the NPP and the NDC, the others had neither date nor time-display telling visitors when the site was updated. However, specific news stories and documents on the NDC website had the date they were posted but not the specific time of day when posted. The NPP website, on the other hand, had both the time and date it was posted for every item. Data from 2016 affirmed the evidence from 2012; that the NDC and NPP used this indicator effectively. The study also found that the GCPP, PNC and CPP websites did not put up calendars of upcoming events and activities, while those of the NPP, NDC and the PPP had outdated calendars that only indicated past events.

A prominent feature on the PNC, NDC and NPP websites was the explicit appeals to engage with the party via the website. They had phrases such as "Connect with Hassan" on the PNC site, or the "Stay Connected" button on the NPP website. In 2016, the PPP introduced the button 'subscribe to our newsletter'. This was an indication of the parties' need to maintain contact with visitors to the site. The official of the NDC explained that the website uses the button "Contact Us" and its social media integration to maintain contact with visitors:

> Social media is now a big thing and so because people hardly visit the websites directly but visit the social media platforms, we have integrated some of our social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – to our website so that when our visitors go there, we can still interact and can also receive updates on these pages without necessarily coming to the websites.

On the assessment of the response time for emails sent to the political parties, the measurement showed that all the websites loaded fully within seven seconds. The PPP website opened faster than any other within two seconds. The process was undertaken five times to get consistent results. With each section, all the websites opened within the time frame. The NDC, NPP, PPP and CPP websites loaded fully within four seconds whereas the GCPP and the PNC websites opened in between five and seven seconds each time. According to Taylor and Kent (2004), one out of two visitors to a website that takes too long to load will move to another within ten seconds after a few tries. The appropriate loading time should therefore be within four seconds. This aspect of the study was not repeated in 2016. Table 1.1 shows the loading time of the websites:

Table 1.1 Time the site takes to load

PARTY	LOADING TIME
PPP	2 seconds
NPP	3 seconds
NDC	4 seconds
PNC	5 seconds
CPP	4 seconds
GCPP	7 seconds

3.4 Dialogic loop

The dialogic loop, according to Kent and Taylor (1998) refers to the extent to which the organisations incorporate interactivity on their websites. Interactivity is one that encourages two-way communication between individuals through an interface. The indicators used in explaining the dialogic loop principle are:

- Opportunity for visitors to send and receive messages from the organisation.
- Option for visitors to fill out surveys identifying priorities and expressing opinions on issues.

All the websites enabled visitors to send enquiries to the website. These enquiries were sent in the form of emails or as comments on news items or posts on documents. While the NPP, NDC, PPP and the CPP allowed visitors both to send emails and comment on their posts, the GCPP and the PNC only allowed comments to be posted directly under each item.

In 2012, an email was sent to each of the parties to assess their response time. The message in the email was as follows:

> Hello, what is the party's masterplan on healthcare delivery for the next two years if you win the election?

There was an email option on the GCPP website but when the researcher sent emails to the website, it rebounded with a mail error message. This could mean that the party paid little attention to the emails or, within the period that the study was conducted, the email developed issues. Three of the parties responded to the email in different timeframes.

The same message was resent in 2016 and aside from the NPP and PPP, no party responded to the emails sent. The GCPP official, when interviewed, believed the party had not seen any challenges with their email account and that questions and comments received from visitors to the website via email were responded to, albeit irregularly. Again, the party receives the bulk of its emails from people outside Ghana.

> For us, because we are a grassroots party, we are more concerned about the views of the people on the ground who do not have access to the Internet much less the email. But we cannot take the views of our supporters for granted. Every comment matters so apart from the email, if they send comments, we treat them with respect even if it comes from people who have already made up their minds [about the election]. It is also true that we have not streamlined our response rates but we hope to employ some volunteers to monitor such emails and comments.

The study also found that each website that allowed visitors to send emails also demanded personal data from visitors before the email could be sent. This enabled the party to contact the visitors at a later 'convenient' date. The NPP had two sections: "Ask a question" and "Get Involved". In these sections, visitors were required to input their details before sending questions. All the websites also provided their telephone numbers which could be used to contact them for further clarification.

Apart from the NPP and the NDC, which had integrated Facebook, Twitter, Flickr and YouTube into their websites, all the others only had Facebook. According to the official of the NPP, this makes the party one of the most "attractive" and active political parties on social media. The official was of the view that social media, rather than the websites, allow many more people to participate in the activities of the party:

> New Media is so powerful in our time, and for the NPP, we are interested in reaching everybody – young or old, employed or unemployed, rich or poor, business people or traders and all manner of persons. There is no other way to be effective today if you do not target your audiences with your ideas.

One essential indicator measured by the researcher is the time frame within which political parties responded to the visitors' (publics') enquiries. As discussed earlier, the study showed that all six websites had created an avenue for visitors to send in messages and request responses from the organisation.

Out of the six websites, only five responded to an email sent by the researcher; and out of those that replied, three (NDC, NPP and PPP) responded directly to the enquiry posed by the researcher. The other two (PNC and CPP) were automated reply messages. One of the automated emails read:

> Thank you for your message. Our officials will contact you later for more information.

After ten days, no contact was received from the party. For the parties whose officials responded to the enquiry, the PPP sent a reply after five hours, while the NPP's reply was received after nineteen hours and forty-six minutes. The NDC's response came after five hours. Meanwhile, the automatic replies from the PNC and the CPP hit the researcher's email within two minutes of sending the enquiry. Table 1.2 gives further details on feedback from the emails.

Table 1.2 Email response time between 2012 and 2016

2012				**2016**	
Political Party Website	**Response Time**	**Type of Response**		**Response Time**	**Type of Response**
PPP http://www.pppghana.org	5 hours	Favourable		No Response	Not Favourable
NPP http://www.thenewpatrioticparty.org/	19 hours	Favourable		6 hours	Favourable
NDC http://www.ndc.org.gh	After five days	Favourable		14 hours	Favourable
PNC http://www.hassanayariga.com	2 minutes	Not Favourable		No response	Not Favourable
CPP	2 minutes	Not		No response	Not

http://www.conventionp eoplesparty.org		Favourable			Favourable
GCPP http://greatconsolidated popularparty.org	No Reply	Not Favourable		No response	Not Favourable

4. Research questions discussed

To put discussions into the right perspective, it is important to examine the research questions raised at the beginning of the study. The four research questions for this study are answered in the discussions below.

4.1. To what extent do the websites of political parties in Ghana have dialogic features?

The four parameters of the dialogic theory expounded by Kent and Taylor (1998) form the basis for answering this question. The parameters are: 'ease of interface', 'maintaining visitors', 'the usefulness of information', and 'dialogic loop'. All the websites had elements of the dialogic features that made it possible for visitors to navigate the sites. What was ineffective on the majority of websites was the essential feedback mechanism. For instance, as discussed earlier, the website of GCPP allowed comments on posts, but enquiries via the official email address yielded no results. According to Bimber et al. (2015), for every web-related communication, the feedback loop had to be complete to ensure sustenance of the relations. Without the assurance of feedback, users feel aggrieved by the seeming rejection.

In fact, fifty percent of the websites analysed had poor feedback mechanisms which generally takes a toll on users who need assistance or clarification on a subject. Moreover, when the researcher sent an email to the GCPP account, it bounced back indicating that the email address was non-functional even though the official from GCPP confirmed the address. The data from 2012 and 2016 showed that even though officials of the parties professed to the importance of feedback in their engagement with the public, the websites examined did not reflect this reality. There was therefore no improvement in the email response time between 2012 and 2016. It is safe to indicate that, generally, the websites that were analysed had elements of the dialogic features but with little or no utilisation.

4.2. To what extent do political parties utilise the interactive features to communicate with their members, sympathisers and voters?

To answer this question, the two-way symmetrical communication model by Grunig (1992) will provide the framework. Two-way symmetrical communication thrives on mutual respect. The content analyses in both 2012 and 2016 offered evidence that all the websites allowed users to comment on posts. As has been argued by Taylor and Kent (2004), comments on websites' posts represent feedback on the information being conveyed and are a useful aspect of determining the interactivity or otherwise of the websites. There were email addresses on all the websites, which invited users to send their enquiries to the political party. The study tested the efficiency of the interactive aspect of emails by sending an email to the political parties, as has already been explained. Two of the parties replied within twenty-four hours and another in five days. The remainder had non-functional email addresses or automated emails that only assured customers of a reply to their enquiry; replies that never came within the period during which the study was conducted. Comment boxes and survey boxes could be found on some of the websites, which encouraged visitors or voters to comment on issues and to share their opinions. To a large extent, political parties in Ghana are lax in their use of the interactive features on websites to communicate with users.

4.3 In what ways do political parties incorporate views and contributions of their website visitors in their campaigns?

Kent and Taylor's (1998) dialogic loop provided a basis for analysing this question in the context of the responses from the interviews. The dialogic loop allows an organisation's publics to communicate with the organisation, and enables organisations to respond to concerns that have been raised by their visitors (publics). The dialogic theory acknowledges the presence of the "other individual", or an event experienced between two persons who have mutual respect for the views of the other, hence elevating the value of both views in a discourse. In the interview with officials of the parties, they revealed that comments posted on party websites are not disregarded but, rather, they are incorporated into broader themes and addressed in party manifestoes. Some of the parties responded that such comments have helped shaping the policies of the party in government. Marcinowski et al. (2014) noted that the gap between accessing Internet resources and a decision to adopt any of such platforms is driven by a fair amount of belief that one's opinions are considered useful by the other owners of the platform.

Similarly, Johannesen (1971) posits that every meaningful relationship should acknowledge the uniqueness of everyone's views so that each participant's views are respected during the exchange. Olinski and Szamrowski (2017) further add that websites that proactively apply the dialogic principles can better engage users and utilise their views for the achievement of the organisation's goals.

4.4 Do political parties in Ghana differ in their use of the websites for political campaigns?

The content analyses of the websites in both periods when data was collected showed that the websites contained information that was not dissimilar and was all tailored to attract potential voters. While the majority of the websites allowed visitors to browse through the page with ease, others lacked a clear site map making it a relatively arduous task to locate specific information. While all sites made use of audiovisual elements, such as video, audio and photo galleries, the two leading political parties – NPP and NDC – had many more such files with dedicated webpages. Hence the websites were designed to perform similar functions – electioneering campaigning and promotion of presidential candidates.

On the other hand, data from the interviews also provided proof that the leading political parties in terms of past results at the polls – NDC and NPP – used the website as a platform to seek donations and spur membership growth. Additionally, all the sites had integrated social media networking sites on the websites to support the parties' engagement with younger supporters. Another observation was that while some of the political parties updated the websites regularly, others could not be bothered, focusing rather on social networking sites.

5. Conclusions

There is no gainsaying the fact that new resources, be they technological or otherwise, can change the way we contemplate both the consequences and the mechanisms of all forms of communication. The data collected and analysed led to one primary conclusion: that leading political parties in Ghana agree that websites represent an avenue for reaching out to an underserved and undecided community of voters who actively seek information on political campaigns. There is, however, evidence to show that most of the parties do not have the resources or skills to employ dedicated officials to work full-time on the websites. This negatively affects the use of website functions to attract and engage both active and passive Internet users. Moreover, the lackadaisical way of responding to queries and requests may dampen Internet users' reliance on the websites for information.

It is important to note that the study also found that some political parties were more inclined to use social networking sites regularly to engage supporters, voters and undecided voters alike. Less than fifty percent of the thirteen active political parties in Ghana had websites, even though all the

parties had some form of Internet presence such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Google+. This may be due to the relatively laborious ways of updating information on websites via content management systems as compared to social media platforms.

In terms of recommendations, this study was limited to the use of websites by political parties. It will be interesting to conduct further studies into the use of social media platforms, both by political parties and voters, in engaging the political space during elections and their potential impact on the electoral fortunes of political parties.

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Appendix I: In-depth interview guide

Introduction	I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. My name is Derick Romeo Adogla, a communications researcher. I would like to talk to you about your party's website. Specifically in this interview, I am assessing how your official website is used and whether, as a political party, you use the websites to interact with your supporters. This is part of a study that seeks to examine how political parties use the websites. Even though I will be taking notes during the session, I will be taping the session because I do not want to miss any of your comments.
Questions	1. What is the rationale behind the creation of your party's website? 2. To what extent has the website made a difference in the communication activities of the party, if any? 3. Are you able to interact with your supporters on the website and what are the tools you use for this activity? 4. Are your visitors allowed to post comments or send emails on the website and how does this tool work? 5. How promptly do you provide feedback to querries or comments? 6. What kinds of information do you host on the website? 7. How often do you update the website? 8. What specific elements, for instance, fundraising and membership, can a supporter who visits your website have access to? How effective are these elements? 9. Are you able to measure the impact of the website on your activities? How do you do this and how effective do you think it is? 10. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your website that you have identified? 11. Is there anything you would like to add that I have not asked?
Conclusion	I am truly grateful for your time and I hope to call on you for any further clarifications if you do not mind. Thank you.

Appendix II: Coding scale

Yes	No	Not Available

KEY:

Ease of interface

INDICATORS	YES	NO
The availability of site maps on homepages		
Easy identification of site maps on homepages		
The incorporation of a search engine on homepages to help site visitors in searching for information on the website		
Easy identification of major links to the rest of the sites on the homepages.		

Usefulness of information

INDICATORS	YES	NO
Updated information		
News stories posted on the site in the last 30 days		
Availability of downloadable information and graphics on the websites		
Availability of statements on their philosophy and mission of the organisation		

Maintaining visitors

INDICATORS	YES	NO
A clear visual on the date and time the site was updated		
Appealing to visitors with explicit statements inviting them to return to their sites.		
Inclusion of calendars of events		

The amount of time that the websites take to load

POLITICAL PARTIES	DURATION (s)
NDC	
NPP	
PPP	
CPP	
PNC	
GCPP	

Dialogic loop

INDICATORS	YES	NO
Opportunities for visitors to send messages and request information to and from the organisation		
Avenues for visitors to answer questions on their priorities and expressing opinions on issues.		
The speed with which an organisation responds to messages sent.		