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**Analysing the textual communication of the Nigerian government's framing of Rice Policy on Facebook**

**Olusegun Hakeem Adebumiti**

Department of Mass Communication,  
Achievers University, Owo, Nigeria  
[adebumiti.oh@achievers.edu.ng](mailto:adebumiti.oh@achievers.edu.ng)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1260-9107>

## Abstract

*This study analysed textual communication on Facebook regarding the Nigerian government's rice policy. The theory of technological determinism formed the theoretical framework for the study. The study analysed 25 posts on rice on the Facebook accounts of selected government handles under the administration of late President Muhammadu Buhari. The study's findings showed that most posts on rice addressed issues related to the government's rice policy. Also, the findings showed the government's commitment to achieving local rice production and food sustainability. The study recommended that the Tinubu government continue to use social media to frame its rice policy, and that such framing should not be limited to Facebook. It further recommended greater use of video and graphic content as alternatives to textual communication in framing the government's rice policy.*

**Keywords:** Agriculture, Anchor borrowers' programme, food security, local production, social media.

## Introduction

Rice is an essential food item for Nigerians and across the globe, as it has continued to play a significant role in everyday diets (Okpiaifo et al., 2020). Perhaps the status of rice is so high because consumers prefer it, occasioned by rapid urbanisation, the reduced time and effort in its preparation, which made it a fast meal for working-class people, and its accessibility to the rich and poor. So important is rice that it has become a matter of state policy and food security in Nigeria (Faleye, 2019). Prior to the evolution of social media, the government used broadcast and print media as means of influencing and informing the public about its policies. With advent of Facebook, Twitter, now X, Instagram, YouTube, etc., government institutions now provide relevant content and reach out to larger audience through their social media networks with the sharing functions available on social media platforms to push its policies, including the rice policy which became more effective on April 2016 (Ebosele. 2016), when the Nigerian government under late President Muhammadu Buhari announced a more stringent policy on rice by banning its importation through the land borders. The adoption of social media as a communication strategy has become familiar with established political institutions that provide political content on their platforms. Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) identify political institutions as politicians, political parties, and political foundations.

In light of this social media technology, institutions that seek to persuade the public must utilise persuasive techniques on social media to promote their policies. Available literature (Odukoya, 2020; Obi-Egbedi et al., 2012; Oparaugo, 2021; Mustapha et al., 2016) supports the view that social media are valuable tools for

marketing agricultural products. The form of communication used by the Nigerian government in framing the rice policy on social media, however, remains a bone of contention. It is against this background that the researcher attempted to analyse the form of communication the Nigerian government used to frame the rice policy on Facebook, an open social media platform used mainly by Nigerians (NapoleonCat, 2023) for social interactions.

## Public Policy

The Nigerian government's rice policy is a public policy. Oni (2016) observes that public policy involves a purposive course of action, characterised by the patterns by which government officials take action to address a particular problem. Postcolonial Nigeria has witnessed agricultural policies that were geared towards important crops such as rice. These policies were made up of actions (trade embargoes, tariffs, and border closure) used to solve a defined problem - capital flight, poor local rice production, etc. (Allen & Ogbe, 2020).

A foremost pioneer of policy science, Harold Lasswell, was the first to categorise the policy process. Lasswell (1956) identified seven stages of the policy process, each with a specific policy-making function. These include intelligence, recommendation, prescription, invocation, application, appraisal, and termination. This contribution to the policy debate stemmed from the functions Lasswell (1956) thought public policy-making should perform to identify five or six stages of the policy process: agenda setting, where the problem is identified; policy formulation, where a solution is proposed; decision-making, where the solution is concluded and legalised; implementation, in which actions follows the solution; evaluation, or the monitoring of the outcomes; and in some instances, the choice to either maintain, replace or terminate the policy.

Based on this selective approach to issues, McCombs and Shaw (1972) proposed the idea of agenda-setting theory (Wanta & Alkazemi, 2017). The ideas of McCombs & Shaw were based on the powers of specific individuals, what Wanta and Alkazemi (2017), citing Lang & Lang (1983), referred to as sources of the media agenda, have a greater influence on others. Hence, it is easier for them to get their demands placed on an agenda than for others. The emphasis of McCombs and Shaw (1972) was on decision makers – the Nigerian government. They argue that for an issue to reach agenda status, it must be influenced by key decision-makers, also known as agenda builders (Lang & Lang, 1983, in Wanta & Alkazemi, 2017). They support their arguments by noting that some opinion leaders can facilitate media coverage (the framing of the rice policy on Facebook) of a particular issue (rice).

## Facebook and Policy Discourse

Facebook has become a critical social media platform for political actors, policy,

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and political communication (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). Many government ministries, political actors and political parties now have Facebook profiles for political communication. Facebook allows registered users to post long and short messages referred to as posts. Most posts on Facebook are text, video, photo, or audio files. This study intends to investigate the textual aspect of the framing of rice policy on Facebook.

A Facebook user begins using the platform after registering their biometric data with Meta, Facebook's parent company. Facebook was established by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 (Conger, 2022). By registering and creating a status, a Facebook user can build a network of contacts by following accounts they are interested in. Such accounts have profiles created by friends, family, institutions, or public figures. There could be accounts created to represent political groups and government officials. Hence, a network of accounts comes into existence and grows in number because of the following that is garnered by such accounts.

Another important feature on Facebook is the hashtag. A hashtag is part of a post that indicates a topic a user is posting about. It is preceded by the symbol "#". It is a beneficial method of labelling which draws attention to what a post is about. With this function, a conversation can emerge as a hashtag topic and be visible to anyone who searches for it. When many users are discussing a topic, Facebook aggregates their conversations into a trend. A trend can be global or local, depending on the location of users who are engaged in that topic. Facebook uses geo-location in aggregating topics. The geo-location of a post is embedded in the post information, especially when the user has location information turned on. Through Facebook, one can have unfiltered access to the accounts of very prominent individuals, such as presidents and celebrities. Extensive research has been conducted on the drivers that prompt users to share information on Facebook. A study by Alhadlaq and Alnuaim (2023) classified posts into categories. These social activities are described as social interaction with people, producing or requiring feedback as well as expressing emotions.

## **Empirical Review**

The study by Odukoya (2020) interrogated the political economy of agricultural commercialisation in Nigeria. The author adopted three theories: the actor-narrative-policies framework of Keeley and Scoones (2003), the post-colonial state theory by Alavi (1972) and the political context and incentive frameworks by Chinsinga & Poulton (2014). The post-colonial state is assumed to be an artificial creation of colonial incursion into Africa. It is a carryover as a neo-colony serving a complicated class arrangement with competing class interests. The post-colonial state, therefore, mediates competing interests of the metropolitan bourgeoisie, the indigenous bourgeoisie and the landed classes. The metropolitan bourgeoisie

controls the economy through the way the global economy accumulates capital. As a result, there is no separation between the public and private spheres. The bourgeoisie relies heavily on state patronage, thereby enabling corruption and kleptocracy. Policies are therefore products of elite interests in Nigeria, and the rice policies reflected this encroachment of private interest into governance. Odukoya's (2020) study indicates that the state in post-colonial Africa suffers from a governance deficit because it was structured to serve elite interests rather than the interests of the masses.

Obi-Egbedi et al. (2012) analyse the import impact of rice trade policy options, including a ban and a tariff increase, on the welfare of households in Nigeria. The research was anchored on the theory of utility. Their findings revealed disparities in welfare between rural and urban households, as rice policy affected urban households negatively but had little effect on rural households in Northern Nigeria, which experienced increased savings. The worst-hit households were urban in southern Nigeria, with little subsistence crop production. Obi-Egbedi et al. (2012) note that a substantial number of rice farmers in Nigeria were located in northern Nigeria, with 83% of farmers in that region. Therefore, they concluded that protectionist policy on rice importation benefited rural farmers in Northern Nigeria. The study by Obi-Egbedi et al (2012) provides insight into the sharp differences in welfare that accrue from the rice policy. The difference is notable in the benefits that accrue to agrarian Northern regions, compared with urban households in Southern Nigeria, populated by working-class people who are primarily not involved in agriculture.

The observations in these studies indicate that behind the rice policy lies an intricate web of elite interests, governance deficits, regional disparities in household welfare, and a continuing preference among many Nigerians for foreign rice brands. There have been notable increases in rice production and value chain improvements. However, the rice policy in a plural state like Nigeria should be the focus of food security promotion. It is imperative that, in a democratic society, the government be accountable to the people and demonstrate that it is working in the interests of the electorate in its policy-making activities. The task of persuasion and support-seeking for the rice policy requires that such policies be broadcast through the media to the broader population so that public opinion aligns with the ruling party's policies. This is where the means of such political communication come in.

Oparaugo (2021) also examine the relationship between social media and politics in Nigeria. He stated that politicians or state actors utilise social media for political communication. That Nigerian politicians would post long posts on Facebook pages about a burning public issue, stating their positions. Political officeholders use this medium to address the public about what they are doing to improve society, the state, or the country. The opposition elements within the country, on their part, use the medium to cast aspersions on those in government for their wrong policies and actions (Oparaugo, 2021).

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Oparaugo (2021) further stated that the two common social media platforms used by Nigerian politicians are Facebook and X. The structure of platforms like Facebook and X allows discussion of public policy issues, unlike WhatsApp, which is restrictive. The study by Oparaugo (2021) was anchored in the theories of technological determinism and uses and gratifications. He identified political information as the content of political communication. Social media, therefore, allows for political talk among users.

Mustapha et al (2016) in another study on how social media are informing a sense of community among people and fostering political engagement. The researchers identified a knowledge gap regarding the relationship between social media use in Africa and Nigeria and political issues. Their study was anchored on social capital theory. They hypothesised that social media platforms are helpful for social structure, building networks with desirable outcomes in collectives on political participation; hence, they hypothesised that social media platforms like Facebook and X could also be used for political information, which is a strong predictor of social capital.

It was also observed that social media could facilitate the democratisation of capacity. Evidence has shown that a huge number of social media users are youths. In political participation, social media platforms are conceived as a public sphere (Baran & Davis, 2012). The researchers utilised a descriptive survey method and distributed questionnaire instruments to 335 students. Findings by Mustapha et al. (2016) revealed that WhatsApp (78.2%), Facebook (69.9%), and X (34.3%) had the highest social media presence and usage. The average number of social media visits per week was 4. The findings also revealed that social media usage was a predictor of social capital. ( $R^2 = 0.221$ ,  $P<0.001$ ). Social media also predicted political participation, and social media use explained 25% of the variance in political participation, just as social capital did. The study by Mustapha et al. (2016) introduced the intervening variable of social capital in the relationship between social media and political participation. What this translates to is that social media fosters social networks with social capital that consequently leads to political participation.

### **Technological Determinism Theory**

Technological determinism theory (TDT) is a reductionist theory that holds that technological advancement drives the development of society's social structure and cultural values. Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929), an American sociologist and economist, was renowned for developing the theory of the TDT. Suffice it to say that Nigeria is a developing country in Sub-Saharan Africa whose economy is dominated by oil and agriculture. It is also a statement of fact that, in terms of technological advancements, the country has not achieved much. However, Nigeria

has a reasonable population of citizens who are educated and knowledgeable in technology. A large number of these people are youths who are technologically oriented. These youths also fit well into the post-modernism economic narrative, which is mainly driven by technology. This is why some studies divided Nigerians into the technological-rich and the technological-poor. This has shaped the Nigerian society.

It is within this frame that Facebook, which is within the scope of this study, was put to the test to determine how it has helped shape, or otherwise, the government's policy direction on rice. The fact that the government used Facebook to frame its rice policy indicates that it is aware of the impact on the populace, which suggests that the people are technologically rich. Such a population is needed to push the rice policy (Guanah, Obi, Egbra & Akumabor, 2018). When the government used social media to frame rice, it was only a pointer to the effectiveness of social media in disseminating information to the people.

## Methodology

This study used content analysis to elicit data. Twenty-five textual posts on rice formed the sample for the study, drawn from a population of forty-eight posts on the Facebook accounts of these government handles: Aso Rock Villa; Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development/Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security; and Muhammadu Buhari, from April to December 2016. In 2016, the Nigerian government, led by the late President Buhari, announced a more stringent rice policy by banning its importation through land borders (Faleye, 2019). These government handles were selected because they were the official social media platforms for disseminating government activities and were active on Facebook during the period under review. Also, some of the handles belong to the country's ministry in charge of agriculture. The content category for the collected data was the number of text-based Facebook posts about rice. To accomplish this, the researcher identified text-based posts. Twenty-five textual posts were identified after the counting in the period under review. The unit of analysis (the things that were counted) for the content analysis was texts on rice from April 2016 to December 2016, on the Facebook accounts of the selected government institutions. The method of data collection was the use of the search button on the pages of selected government institutions, with the keyword "Rice 2016". Bruns and Stieglitz (2014) note that keyword search can reveal communication and engagement patterns in user metrics or temporal metrics for a given theme.

## Data Presentation

The government handles, dates, and the textual communication on the rice posts are presented below:

1. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: April 25, 2016: Agric Minister tours Kebbi **rice** farms.

2. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: May 6, 2016: Local **Rice** Production Targets: Chief Audu Ogbeh holds meeting with Zamfara state governor – Abdul-aziz Yari.
3. Aso Rock Villa: June 7, 2016: Office of the Vice President Press Release: FG sets up national task force on **rice**.
4. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: June 9, 2016: Agric mechanisation: Agric minister flags off distribution of 500 threshers to rice farmers. This generated a comment from one of the users asking for the states. The account handler responded by listing the 12 states that benefited. Also, a user asked if local **rice** is better than foreign **rice**. The handler responded that local **rice** is better than foreign **rice**, as most foreign rice has low nutritional value, while some rice had been stored for close to 15 years before being shipped into Nigeria.
5. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: June 11, 2016: Local **Rice** Boost: Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development – Chief Audu Ogbeh on a working visit to Olam Rice Processing Facility in Nasarawa State.
6. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: July 14, 2016: Taraba state governor, Darius Ishaku, visits Minister of Agriculture and shares his state's plans to boost its **rice** production
7. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: June 16, 2016: Ebonyi State seeks collaboration to boost local **rice** production ...
8. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Sept 5, 2016: We are determined to reclaim our rating as the highest **rice-producing** state in Nigeria ... - Ebonyi State Gov. Dave Umahi
9. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Sept 15, 2016: I did not say **rice** is expensive because Nigerians eat too much **rice** – Ogbeh
10. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Sept 20, 2016: Dry season farming: Jigawa targets 150,000 hectares of **rice** ...
11. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development: Oct 1, 2016: Snippets on President Buhari's address on the 56<sup>th</sup> independence anniversary... No. 23. At the same time, the federal ministry of Agriculture and the central bank have been mobilised to encourage local production of **rice** ...

12. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Oct 10, 2016: The good news is the private sector is responding to agriculture in a way we have never seen in this country, they own the major **rice** mills ... - Hon. Minister – Chief Audu Ogbeh
13. Aso Rock Villa: December 5, 2016: Aso Rock Villa: October 16, 2016: Nigeria Customs Service Press Release: The restriction on the importation of vehicles follows that of **rice**, whose imports have been banned through the land borders since April 2016
14. Aso Rock Villa: October 16, 2016: Nigeria Custom Service Press Release: **Rice** imports remain banned through the land borders
15. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Oct 21, 2016: In the News: We remain focused on achieving self-sufficiency in **rice** by 2018 ... - Ogbeh
16. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: October 27, 2016: Earlier Today: Hon. Minister – Chief Audu Igbeh arrived Bida, Niger state, with CBN Gov., and Kebbi state Gov. on tour to anchor borrowers **rice** farms in the state
17. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Oct 27, 2016: The Hon. Minister – Chief Audu Ogbeh was in the field to interact with the **rice** farmers ...
18. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Nov 11, 2016: Inspection of **Rice** Farms in Jigawa: Hon. Minister – Chief Audu Ogbeh, CBN Gov. Kebbi state Gov., Jigawa Gov. and Emir of Hadejia during the inspection of **rice** plantations under the anchor borrowers programme in Jigawa
19. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development: Nov 18, 2016: The focus of the 2016/2017 dry season GES is on four major crops: **rice**, wheat, maize and groundnuts – Perm. Sec. Dr Ahmed Shehu
20. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Nov 30, 2016: Despite the challenges, we are making some progress; we have acquired **rice** mills of varying capacities for distribution to **rice** farmers ... - Ogbeh
21. Aso Rock Villa: Dec 14, 2016: President Buhari commends CBN efforts in boosting self-sufficiency in **rice** production in Nigeria
22. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Dec 16, 2016: Hon. Minister – Chief Audu Igbeh and entourage being taken round on tour of Olam Nigerian Farms and **Rice** milling facilities in Ondorie, Nasarawa state ...

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23. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Dec 16, 2016: We are developing a 10,000-hectare, fully integrated paddy farm on the Greenfield site with an expected yield of 10MT per hectare over two annual crop cycles. This is based on four varieties of high-yield **rice**... - OLAM Farms
24. Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security: Dec 16, 2016: In Kebbi State, we are stocking **rice** now and we encourage other states to do the same ... - Gov. Bagudu of Kebbi State
25. Muhammadu Buhari: Dec 23, 2016: I am proud of the successful agricultural partnership between Lagos and Kebbi states, which has produced LAKE (Lagos-Kebbi) **Rice**. I commend Governors Akinwumi Ambode and Atiku Bagudu for fulfilling the MOU they signed in March 2016, to boost **rice** production

### **Discussion of Findings**

The textual posts above showed how the Nigerian government used social media to frame its rice policy. The fact that the Nigerian government used social media to drive its rice policy complements the positions of Inegbedion et al. (2021) that the use of social media for marketing agricultural products in Nigeria often improves efficiency and farmers' sales turnover. Also, the use of textual communication by the Nigerian government to drive its rice policy on Facebook was supported by the study by Gkikas et al. (2022), which highlighted the important role of texts in users' engagement and awareness. The researcher opines that several significant relationships exist between text-based posts on social media and users' performance metrics. They added that when a post's text is more straightforward to comprehend, longer, and has many hashtags, it will get more engagement and awareness from social media users. Jackson (2020) also supported the findings of this study, noting that posts with over 80 characters seem to achieve higher levels of user engagement on social media.

From April to December 2016, 25 textual posts on rice policy on the government's Facebook page were analysed. One of the posts showed that the then Agriculture Minister, now late, Chief Audu Ogbeh, toured rice farms in Kebbi State. After the government announced a ban on rice imports through land borders (Faleye, 2019), it commenced the Anchor Borrowers' Programme (Odukoya, 2020), which supported rice farmers in parts of the country where rice is grown. Kebbi State is one of those states. The minister visiting the farms showed the importance the government placed on achieving local rice production. The minister also toured Zamfara State, where he met the then-Governor, Abdul-aziz Yari, to discuss ways of reaching local rice production targets. In another post generated from a press

release by the office of the then Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo, the federal government was reported to be setting up a national task force on rice. This indicates that the government was intentional in its rice policy. The task force is expected to work towards actualising the government's local rice production. This is why Faleye (2019) sees the rice policy and border closure as a public policy that went side by side with restrictions on the importation of rice, which finds justification by state actors to convince the public that such a policy was in the interest of the public by indicating that the trans-border space constitutes a threat to the state.

Also, in one of the posts, the late Chief Ogbeh was on a working visit to the Olam rice processing facility in Nasarawa State. The Olam facility is a private firm which is known for rice processing. This firm is strategic in its approach to achieving local rice production through the federal government. The Minister of Agriculture's visit was further evidence that the government sees the private sector as a major stakeholder in food sustainability. Moreover, one of the challenges with the rice policy is the production of high-quality rice, as identified by Abbas et al. (2018). This is what the government sought to achieve by empowering private firms like Olam to produce high-quality rice for Nigerians.

In another post on rice that was content analysed, "the agriculture minister flagged off distribution of 500 threshers to rice farmers towards encouraging agriculture mechanisation." This generated a comment from one of the Facebook users asking for the states. The account handler responded by listing the 12 states that benefited. Also, a user asked if local rice is better than foreign rice. The handler responded that local rice is better than foreign rice, as most foreign rice has low nutritional value, while some rice had been stored for close to 15 years before being shipped into Nigeria. This was also the view of Abbas et al (2018).

Also, in another post, the governments of Niger, Taraba, and Ebonyi were reported to be interested in rice production. This indicates that the federal government also encouraged states to pursue food sustainability by providing credit support through the Anchor Borrowers' Programme, supervised by the Central Bank of Nigeria. Aremu and Akinwamide (2018), in their study on prospects and challenges of sustainable rice production in Igbemo Ekiti, Southwest Nigeria, encouraged the government to revive rice production in the country.

In one of the posts, the then Ebonyi State governor, Dave Umahi, in tandem with the recommendations of Aremu and Akinwamide (2018), noted that the state was determined to reclaim its rating as the highest rice-producing state in Nigeria. Another post also showed that the Jigawa State government, in preparation for the dry season farming, noted that it would target 150,000 hectares of rice. This was also in line with the recommendations of Aremu and Akinwamide (2018) to states in Nigeria as part of measures aimed at achieving local rice production. However, in another post, the agriculture minister, late Chief Ogbeh, was forced to issue a press

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statement to defend an allegation against him that he said rice was expensive because Nigerians eat too much rice. Rice became expensive after the government announced a ban on its import via land borders. The official reason for the ban was to enhance rice production capacity and increase self-sufficiency (Allen & Ogbe, 2020). Self-sufficiency in the production of local rice has inadvertently raised its price, making rice an expensive meal for many households in Nigeria (Johnson et al., 2013; Ogunleke, 2020).

The technological determinism theory (TDT) by Thorstein Veblen (1857–1929) was used to test the theoretical framework of this study and was aptly supported by the findings regarding textual communication. TDT suggested that societies with greater exposure to technological advancements would be better off than those without such exposure. It suffices that Nigeria, the scope of this study, is part of one of the world's technological economies. Thus, the government's use of textual communications on Facebook, a platform that is accessible through technological means, is essential to drive the rice policy, since those who are exposed to the messages are Nigerians, who are familiar with the posts about the rice policy on Facebook, due to their high exposure to technological advancements.

## **Conclusion**

The government's use of text messaging as a communication channel indicates that the message of the rice policy reached the people, who have been defined as technologically rich. The government was intentional about its rice policy, introducing farm mechanisation and providing credit support to rice farmers. The government also partnered with a private firm to mill rice. This will not only ensure food sustainability but also improve the quality of rice processing.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made:

- i. The Nigerian government should continue to make use of social media to drive policies that are geared towards impacting the lives of the people. Social media handlers who are knowledgeable about the use of user-generated content should be assigned this onerous task.
- ii. The framing of the rice policy by the Nigerian government should not be limited to Facebook. Other social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn, and Instagram, should also be explored. Also, other forms of communication should be explored.

The use of video and graphic content is an alternative to textual communication.

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