

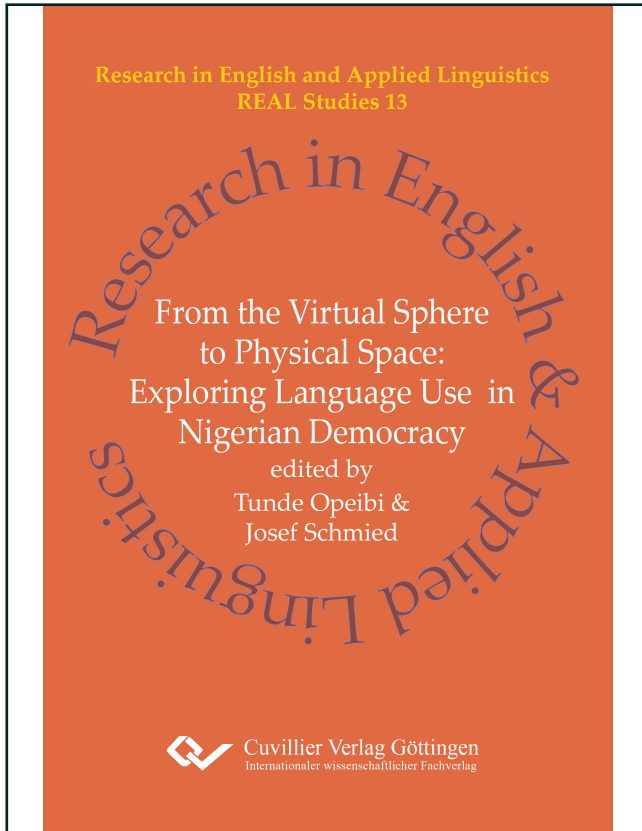


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From the Virtual Sphere to Physical Space

Exploring Language Use in Nigerian Democracy



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Gaining Political Capital through Social Media: A Study of Akinwunmi Ambode's Twitter Campaigns during the 2015 Elections in Nigeria

Tunde Opeibi

1. Introduction

1.1. Political Capital and Online Campaign Tools

The phenomenal growth and impact of social media tools in modern societies may be difficult to measure considering their proliferation and ubiquity as well as the profound influence they exert on human activities within virtually every sphere of life. Political and democratic practices have benefited from the range of social and digital technologies now being deployed to promote and propagate political agenda and government policies.

Digital political campaigns have become a key tool for amassing enormous political capital since such platforms help political actors to overcome the geographical and temporal limitations associated with traditional means of campaigning. The potential of web-based platforms to transmit their messages faster and wider – and perhaps with more impact – makes them more attractive. Rhetorical strategies executed through online channels thus remain one of the most effective ways to convince the electorate and win their support due largely to the immediate visual and mental impact as well as the quantity and speed of digital campaign messages.

In the literature “Political capital refers generally to the trust, goodwill and influence a politician has with the public and other **political** figures. This goodwill is a type of invisible currency that **politicians** can use to mobilize the voting public or spend on policy reform” (Wikipedia). Within the context of this study, it is viewed as the use of social media resources in creative and innovative ways to score higher political points, acquire positive endorsements, and elicit support among unexpected groups beyond conventional expectations. This ‘invisible currency’ spent in the form of heavy online presence publicises the candidate beyond personal profile and campaign adverts. His strategies thus generate political goodwill that earns him additional followership. The platform adopts crowd-sourcing strategies by linking the multiple online channels mounted by the candidate on a single web platform.

In the April 2015 governorship election in Lagos, Nigeria had fifteen candidates in contention. However, the battle appeared to be between Mr Akinwunmi Ambode, the candidate of the ruling party in Lagos (the All Progressives Congress [APC]), and Mr Jimmy Agbaje, the candidate of the opposition party (the People's Democratic Party [PDP]). It was observed that Ambode started using virtual protocols to introduce his political ambition and subtly seeking the sup-

port of the populace before the primaries of the All Progressives Congress (APC). Apart from creating a personal website, he introduced his campaigns through an endorsement on a popular Nigerian mobile phone voucher (Glo Mobile). Media reports showed that Mr Ambode registered more online presence and utilised more social media tools than Mr Agbaje.

Ambode’s online presence covered virtually all the platforms: Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google plus, and Instagram. This multilateral online campaign strategy helped to crowdsource and interconnect his various supporters from different online channels. This made it easier to assess and monitor levels of support and the traffic of users while coordinating the perception of citizens and the pool of opinions about his candidature, chances, and programmes across these major web-based platforms.

In fact, a major opinion poll conducted by an independent pollster shortly before the election returned more support for Ambode:

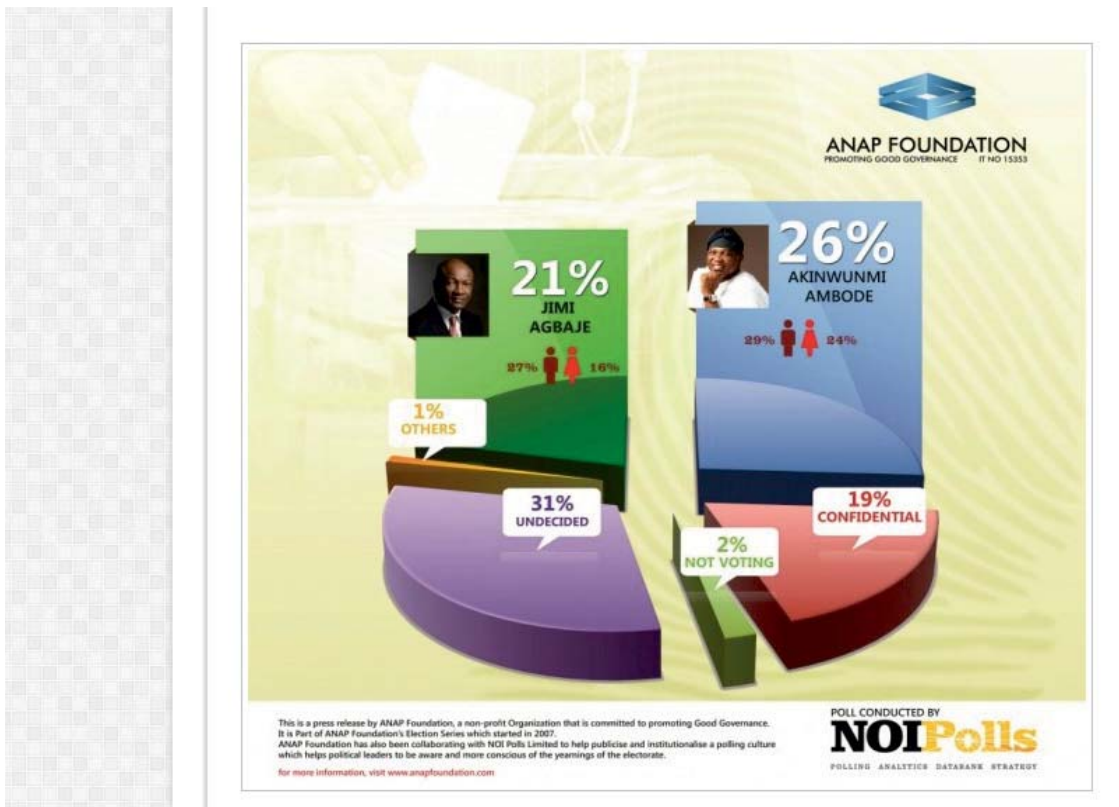


Figure 1: Result of Opinion Polls conducted before the governorship election of April 2015

2. Literature Review: Twitter as Campaign Tool

Since their emergence, social media have been praised for bridging communication gaps across social and demographic divides. The use of these tools to renegotiate existing social and political relationships between political actors and citizens has become one of the key features of online political discourse. Boyd (2010: 39) suggests four affordances of most social networking platforms including Twitter. He sees them as a genre of ‘networked publics’ involving an ‘imagined collective’ arising from particular permutations of users, their practices and the affordances of technology. These affordances are (i) persistence (capture and archiving of content), (ii) replicability (duplication of content), (iii) scalability (broad visibility of content) and (iv) search ability (access to content via search).

As a microblogging service, Twitter allows its users to post short text messages of up to 140 characters in length on personalised profiles. Although most of the registered users of the platform use it for social networking, entertainment, information sharing and social mobilisation, politicians are beginning to take advantage of the services of Twitter for political communication and civic engagement purposes.

Bohman (2004: 139) observes that the new technologies are having positive and stimulating effects on a global form of democracy, thereby encouraging a new and open social space. Using Twitter as an advertising tool, candidates can have their tweets show up in the timelines of relevant users or in a search result. Messages are posted simultaneously to all the contacts, and the posts on the Twitter feeds can go a longer way to shape opinions and perceptions about a particular issue. It becomes more pervasive and influential when the tweets are retweeted several times by key, influential personalities. Twitter promotes user-to-user exchanges, encourages conversationality and is used as a tool to broadcast messages and initiate collaboration (Honeycutt & Herring 2009).

Hashtags are frequently used to tag ongoing discourses or searchable talk, or topics that are trending. Promoted hashtags appear first in the list of trending topics and are a highly effective way to start a conversation about a relevant topic (Caroline 2012). They are described as an ‘emergent convention for labelling the topic of a micropost and a form of metadata incorporated into posts’ (Zappavigna 2013: 1). This kind of discourse tagging is the beginning of searchable talk, a change in social relations whereby we mark our discourse, so that it can be found by others, in effect so that we can bond around particular values (Zappavigna 2011: 1).

Twitter enables handlers to invite connections with an unseen audience and followers or friends. This is often done by creating or incorporating a hashtag to label shared social meanings and values as well as their sentiments on particular issues or subjects that may be private or public. This explains the instances of multiple retweeting of a hashtag for which tweeters feel very passionate. In political twittering, candidates create hashtags that suit their messages or express

their profile. When these are uploaded or posted on their handles, the hashtags automatically appear in the social feeds of their followers. Thus, Twitter allows contents sharing among tweeters and their followers. The extensive or perhaps ‘endless’ and speedy sharing of contents, hashtags, news, information, and messages through retweeting puts the platform ahead of other social media tools. *Mentions* and *re-tweets* keep the thread of conversation expanding on the platform for maximum reach and impact.

Zappavigna (2011: 4) adds that the platform also enables users to interact with the service via a third-party application that presents the feeds of microposts in different ways – in some cases in novel visual forms. The advantage of this online service is that it can collect huge communal reactions to issues and topics that appear on tweeters’ feeds. For politicians and stakeholders, such widespread cross-platform social media response can serve as a huge opportunity to attract a followership that may be ordinarily impossible through traditional media outlets.

The use of Twitter for political campaigns has been gaining popularity in the last couple of years. Zhang et al. (2013) observe that political parties and candidates can utilise social media tools like Twitter to empower and mobilise their supporters. In their studies on the impact of different social media tools on voters’ attitude and behaviour during the 2012 presidential campaigns in the United States of America, they report that many voters were influenced through the use web-based media technologies deployed by the parties and their candidates or independent support groups (in Jungherr 2015). In their study of the 2010 UK general election, Graham et al. (2013) find that some candidates specifically used Twitter as a tool for mobilisation and relationship formation with the citizens. However, some other scholars such as Aragon et al.’s (2013) report that some political actors use Twitter as a one-way flow communication tool. The rate of usage varies from country to country and in different political contexts.

In some political events – for example, in the 2009 European Parliament election in the Netherlands – the rate of Twitter usage was relatively low (Vergeer et al. 2013). Sometimes only very few political candidates and citizens adopted the microblogging platform as found during the 2007 and 2011 general elections in Nigeria. However, the 2015 general elections witnessed a significant increase in the use of Twitter for electioneering. The two main political parties, the People’s Democratic Party (PDP), the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the 12 minor active political parties utilised web-based resources. However, only the two main political parties – PDP and APC – maintained a heavy web presence as well as the use of Twitter accounts before and after the elections. Different twitter hashtags were created during the period to initiate and sustain campaigns-related topics and conversation: #NigeriaDecides2015, #VoteGEJ, #TransformationAgenda, #VotePDP, #SupportPDP, #SupportAPC, #Vote4Change, #SupportJonathan/Sambo, #VoteBuhari/Osinbajo, #VoteAmbode, #SupportAgbaje, #LagosDecides2015, #Ambo2015.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Androtsoupoulos (2006: 421) has suggested the significance of the gradual ‘interplay of technological, social, and contextual factors in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices’. He further suggests that these technologies interfacing discourse may play ‘the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet’. He believes that the social context of computer-mediated language practices acts as an important variable in the description of online discourses. Therefore, by adopting the approach described here as *computer mediated pragma-discursive analysis* (CMPDA), the model offers the following suggestions. One, a computer-mediated communication strategy that demonstrates interactions between physical humans and virtual protocols – between humans, computers, and web-based communication devices in a social context. Two, an online discourse strategy that recognises and accommodates local intelligence, the shared values of participants and social cultural expressions in meaning-making processes. Three, a framework that shows how online communication and cyber behaviour of internet users promote networking, mobilisation, interactions, and participation as social practices that accomplish social goals.

While Susan Herring’s (2001, 2004) computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) remains the classic underlying model for analysing online discourses, CMPDA combines resources from CMC, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. To this end, interpreting some rhetorical devices identified in the posts goes beyond the conventional descriptive approach in CMC. Some of the online political texts as advertisements are considered as creative use of language that may include a blend of socioculturally based text, images and meanings designed to persuade people. The perspective adopted here is rooted in the description of social media discourse as the ways in which virtual texts are constructed and communicated by political actors using web-based platforms to initiate and/or [re-]produce political actions. It considers the major advantage of online political discourse as the power of the new technologies to extend the reach of participants, liberalise citizens’ accessibility to political actors, encourage a range of opinions on issues and broaden the sphere of political influence.

To a large extent, the emerging online political communication culture remains the same message but with new channels and new methods of communicating political issues. This is because some of the traditional offline discursive practices are now being migrated to virtual platforms. Although online communication modes appear more diffuse, it is noteworthy that even with the limitation in the volume of text in these microblogging services, politicians are still able to broadcast successfully direct and short persuasive messages to woo voters. The additional advantage is that these technologies now make communication faster, more inclusive, and more engaging.

In related literature (e.g. Cockroft & Cockroft 1992), rhetorical strategies are critical in the analysis of political communication whether online or offline. Us-

ing Aristotle's traditional triad, Cockcroft & Cockcroft (1992) explain how these strategies operate in political discourse. For instance, *ethical argument* is believed to rely on the use of *good sense*, *goodwill*, and *good moral character* as the basis for persuading the audience. Political candidates demonstrate this by showing that they are aware of the issues and problems at hand and they have the experience and competence to solve the problems. The profile of the candidate's achievement in public service, testimonials and endorsement from credible key national figures and institutions, as well as positive comments from respected citizens, are often projected to support the candidate's credentials.

Further, political actors use language to arouse passions and emotions in the audience (pathetic argument/proofs). The candidate might appeal to events, issues and vivid images that may elicit emotions. Religious, ethnic, and national sentiments may be projected through a careful use of language and linguistic elements that convey emotional appeals. Political actors also use topic, examples, data or statistics among others as the basis for inducing belief and persuading the electorate (logical argument/proofs). For instance, the candidate may quote the number of citizens that could not have access to basic services, number of government officials that have compromised basic ethical standards, or data on stolen public funds by some politicians in the other party. Van Dijk (2006) elaborates these as strategies to: (i) emphasise our good things, (ii) emphasise their bad things, (iii) de-emphasise our bad things, and (iv) de-emphasise their good things. Such rhetorical strategies may be combined with graphology, sound bites, parallelism, intertextuality, and metaphor.

3. Methodology and Analysis: Ambode's Tweets as Political Capital

Ambode's Twitter campaigns follow the tradition in which offline political discourse habits are unwittingly transferred to online platforms. The improved internet access and ownership of mobile devices among Nigerians by 2015 serves as an additional advantage for the candidate to utilise the microblogging service as a major campaign tool.

The process of extracting relevant data involved manual download of posts, tweets, and re-tweets from Ambode's Twitter account. This was supplemented with web searches on the candidate's profile and campaign activities, as well as on key topics on the 2015 elections in Lagos to gain a better understanding of the range of online mentions of the 2015 Lagos governorship election campaigns. Messages and posts stored in the archive of his Twitter handle were examined and the relevant ones were extracted for analysis. Out of over 1,600 relevant tweets, about 20 posts were selected for discussion. A mixture of tweets, re-tweets and posts from the candidate and his followers were equally selected for content analysis.

Ambode registered his Twitter account on 2nd February 2014 with the handle @AkinwunmiAmbode before he was nominated as his party's flag bearer. It was observed that activities on this online channel increased rapidly as campaign ac-

tivities progressed. The platform experienced its heaviest traffic between February and March 2015, the closest weeks to polling day.

The media and online monitoring of Ambode's campaign activities revealed that he used his Twitter platform to complement his campaigns on other web-based media channels. His official website (www.akinwunmiambode.com), for instance, had plugins and hyperlinks to his other social media tools. Visitors to the site could therefore connect with Ambode on his other online platforms. The following URLs are some of the Twitter links heavily utilised and patronised during the campaigns: https://twitter.com/AMBODE_2015; [CONTINUITY@Ambode_2015](https://twitter.com/CONTINUITY@Ambode_2015); Ambode for Governor, Lagos 2015; #VOTEAPC; www.ambodeforgovernor.com.

The Twitter handle of this candidate also serves multiplatform purposes. For instance, it contains tweets and re-tweets on a wide range of information such as national and international news, local issues, breaking news, entertainment news, information on his party and its presidential candidate, among other newsworthy items. Mr Ambode and his followers also use the platform to post their views and opinions on trending topics or hashtags.

3.1. Analysis of Ambode's Twitter Handle

Ambode and his supporters used the microblogging site to post messages containing information on his campaign activities and those of his party. They also retweeted other messages of interest and interacted with other Twitter users during the period. As found in previous studies (e.g. Graham et al. 2013) the one-sided online behaviour shows that in most cases Twitter is used primarily as a broadcasting medium and not necessarily as a platform for public dialogue. However, this study found that Ambode used the platform for partial civic engagement in a few instances when he responded to questions and messages posted by followers and visitors.

Both the technological and informational features of the platform combine to function as election campaign techniques. Visitors and supporters can easily register on the platform to *follow* Mr Ambode and join in the conversation or share his views. The page is updated almost daily with information about the candidate, campaign events, and venues of his political rallies or town hall meetings. Pictures and videos of his campaign activities are uploaded on the site and can easily be accessed by online users. The Twitter page also provides a link where users, followers and citizens can post comments on any issues found on the channel. As an open-source platform, the feedback channel or 'post your comments' button allows interaction between the users and the candidate at one level and among the online users at another level. These asynchronous and sometimes synchronous features of computer-mediated communication make social media networks more appealing to citizens as democratic platforms. Physical and offline political campaigns lack such interactive features. It is interesting to see how this candidate utilised the technology to engage citizens and mobilise support for his electoral ambition.



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Months	Dates	Tweets	(Re-Tweets)	Total
March	1	5	(15, 13, 12, 17, 8)	65
March	2	5	(6, 4, 5, 3, 15)	33
March	3	4	(3, 8, 8, 17)	36
March	4	4	(5, 10, 29, 27)	71
March	5	2	(8, 12)	20
March	6	3	(10, 7, 7)	24
March	7	4	(31, 28, 21, 14)	94
March	8	1	(19)	19
March	9	6	(10, 12, 14, 16, 7, 11)	70
March	10	4	(12, 13, 10, 5)	40
March	11	5	(7, 9, 8, 7, 14)	45
March	12	8	(9, 7, 12, 7, 8, 19, 39, 5)	106
March	13	3	(12, 10, 10)	32
March	14	4	(8, 18, 16, 3)	45
March	15	6	(7, 11, 6, 8, 11, 4)	47
March	16	7	(13, 2, 2, 5, 5, 12, 9)	48
March	17	13	(26, 5, 4, 7, 19, 29, 15, 12, 18, 12, 8, 10, 29)	194
March	18	12	(19, 26, 19, 28, 13, 12, 11, 11, 7, 18, 7, 23)	194
March	19	10	(27, 16, 12, 18, 23, 16, 17, 25, 17, 24)	195
March	20	7	(20, 17, 35, 12, 14, 15, 12)	125
March	21	7	(16, 51, 41, 42, 5, 29, 18)	202
March	22	4	(58, 15, 12, 31)	116
March	23	10	(30, 7, 6, 7, 2, 11, 8, 7, 5, 23)	106
March	24	6	(20, 14, 16, 22, 3, 13)	88
March	25	4	(33, 7, 10, 17)	67
March	26	6	(36, 24, 32, 9, 38, 15)	154
March	27	3	(4, 8, 46)	58
March	28	4	(67, 54, 65, 12)	198
March	29	2	(97, 59)	156
March	30	No Record for 30th		
March	31	1	(169)	169
April	1	5	(29, 46, 10, 20, 242)	347

Months	Dates	Tweets	(Re-Tweets)	Total
April	2	11	(55, 77, 46, 42, 257, 163, 160, 128, 196, 99, 169)	1392
April	3	14	(61, 115, 159, 141, 144, 64, 29, 104, 155, 30, 92, 151, 57, 46)	1348
April	4	15	(188, 16, 53, 130, 87, 6, 81, 95, 46, 87, 48, 38, 26, 46, 102)	1049
April	5	17	(35, 28, 47, 30, 9, 43, 84, 58, 53, 61, 74, 36, 35, 58, 258, 80, 62)	1051
April	6	8	(23, 26, 63, 81, 151, 128, 110, 175)	757
April	7	23	(74, 76, 154, 102, 71, 236, 31, 115, 64, 67, 94, 54, 53, 47, 59, 42, 38, 59, 131, 70, 177, 123, 99)	2036
April	8	23	(68, 85, 77, 90, 63, 45, 90, 84, 34, 13, 40, 29, 71, 30, 82, 68, 48, 80, 65, 45, 73, 80, 78)	1438
April	9	16	(88, 48, 53, 89, 101, 174, 102, 89, 51, 64, 56, 60, 49, 52, 47, 53)	1176
April	10	3	(126, 150, 186)	462
April	11	4	(128, 113, 130, 626)	997
April	12	3	(1, 100, 546, 206)	853
April	13	3	(123, 44, 21)	188
April	14	1	(52)	52
April	15	1	(62)	62
April	16	1	(40)	40
April	17	3	(172)	172

Table 1: Statistics of Ambode’s Tweets and Re-tweets between March and April 2015

In the table above, we showed the statistics of tweets and re-tweets found on Ambode’s handle between March and April 2015.

As shown in the graphs below, the level and intensity of use and interactions on Ambode’s Twitter were dictated by the political season and the relevance of topical issues. It is noteworthy that the level of traffic during the election campaign season increases rapidly. For instance, between the 17th and 21st of March, the number of tweets and re-tweets hovers between 194 and 202 compared with other days. The period coincides with the presidential election that was held on the 18th March 2015. Expectedly, because Mr Ambode himself was a major stakeholder in one of the presidential candidates’ party, his Twitter handle experienced a high volume of online interactions. The situation becomes more interesting if one also considers the period between the 1st and 12th of April 2015. The governorship election in which Ambode contested was held on 11th April 2015. The days before the election (the 7th, 8th & 9th of April) were used to intensify his campaign activities while those after the election were devoted to congratulatory messages, which explains the significant rise in the graph during these two periods.

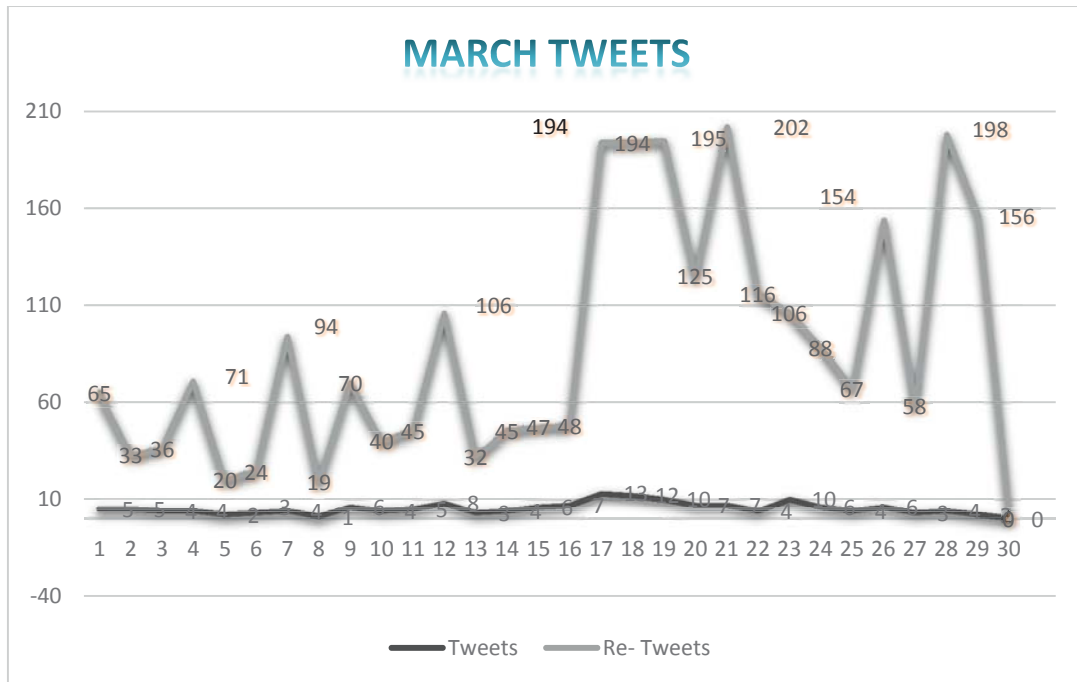


Figure 2: Graphic representation of Activities on the Twitter Handle of Mr Amode (March 2015)

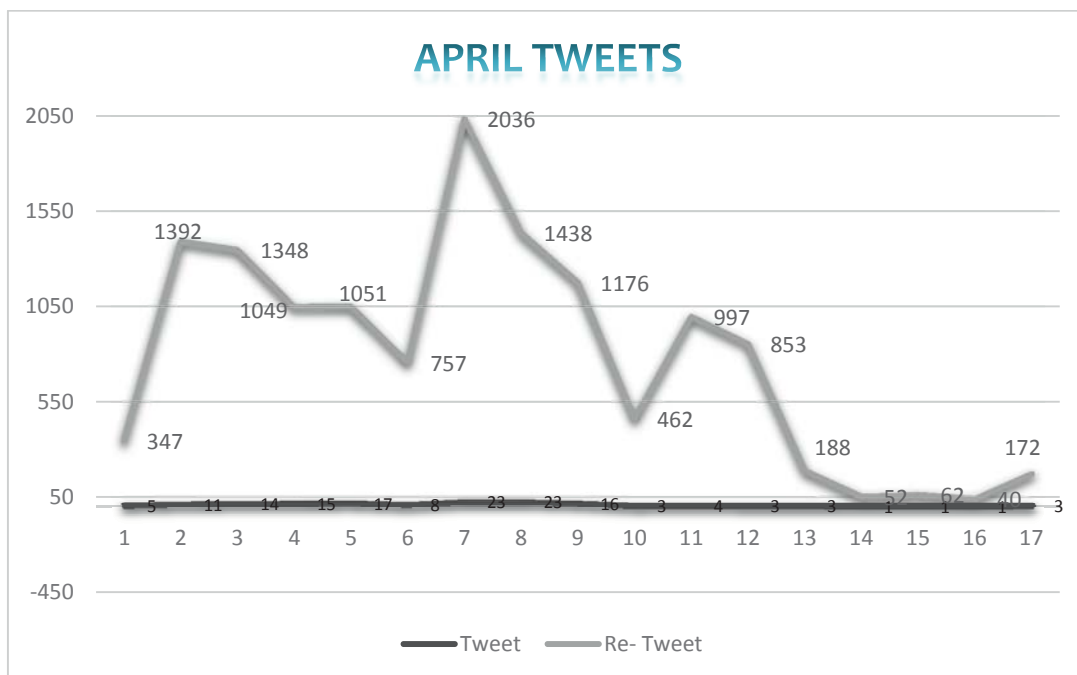


Figure 3: Graphic representation of Activities on the Twitter Handle of Mr Amode (April 2015)