SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE 2011 ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA
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I. INTRODUCTION

The 2011 general elections witnessed a remarkable use of social media as a political communication tool in Nigeria. Three major issues underline the tremendous use of social media tools during the 2011 elections. Firstly, the use of social media in Nigeria’s 2011 elections reflects a global trend towards “internet elections” or “e-electioneering” (Macnamara 2008). Around the world, rapidly expanding access to internet, increased availability of internet ready smart-phones and other communication devices, as well as the evolution of web-based new media – personal websites, social networking sites, blogs, e-newsletters, have redefined methods of political communication, leading to a significant shift towards the use of social media in the electoral process. Previously, network television and newspapers dominated coverage of electioneering and were the primary sites of election-related information. But today, the social media has become a major election information sharing platform globally. Because of its ease of use, speed, and reach, social media is revolutionizing the efficiency of election administration, coverage and reporting.

The second issue that underline the use of social media in Nigeria’s 2011 elections is the tendency of some Nigerian politicians to tap into the opportunities offered by the social media for on-line campaigning. During the 2011 general elections, many politicians, particularly the presidential aspirants, used social media tools to connect with voters and constituents. Facebook and Twitter appear to be the most widely used social media platforms by the politicians. For example, in December 2010, it was estimated that Goodluck Jonathan had nearly 300,000 fans on his Facebook page (Ekine 2010). Other presidential aspirants like Dele Momodu, Ibrahim Shekarau, Nuhu Ribadu, Atiku Abubakar, and Ibrahim Babangida, all had Twitter and other social media accounts. Political parties like the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), and Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) also maintained Facebook accounts. Social media offered politicians and their parties the opportunity to broadcast messages and recruit a huge number of volunteers to support their campaign.
The third issue that underscore the use of social media in Nigeria’s 2011 elections is the tendency of Nigerian civil society and the electorate to take up social media as a tool for improving the efficiency of election observation. Prior to the conduct of the 2011 elections, elections in Nigeria have been largely flawed by vote rigging and other electoral malpractices. The 2003 and 2007 elections were particularly marked by dissatisfaction by candidates, voters and observers. The elections were trailed by complaints of irregularities such as disenfranchisement of prospective voters, snatching of ballot boxes from election officials and stuffing of the boxes with invalid ballot papers, as well as allegations of collusion between election officials and politicians to alter election results and subvert popular mandate (Ibrahim and Ibeanu 2009). The flaws that characterized the conduct of the 2007 elections severely dented the integrity of elections in Nigeria’s, and triggered demands for freer, fairer, and more transparent elections.

To address the flaws that marred previous elections in Nigeria, various organizations, institutions and individuals set up social media platforms that enabled the citizens to oversee the electoral process and report electoral malpractices to authorities through their mobile phones, computers and other electronic devices. Through social media platforms, overwhelming number of videos, photos, tweets and comments were shared. In the words of one analyst, “the widespread use of these real-time media severely limited electoral malpractices because we found that people were aware that they were on camera and this made them operate at their best behaviour” (Omokri 2011). Attahiru Jega, Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), also agrees that the use of social media during the 2011 elections “enhanced transparency in the electoral process and made INEC more accountable to the public in the conduct of elections” (cited in Amuchie 2012).

The 2011 general elections offer a unique context and opportunity to examine the use of social media in elections, especially the usefulness and applicability of social media in the electoral environment. Although it seems obvious that social media contributed in no small measure to the success of the 2011 elections, it is pertinent to understand specifically how particular stakeholders in the 2011 elections, like INEC, politicians/political parties, the electorate, and CSOs, used the social media during the elections.
This study will analyze the role of social media in the 2011 elections, highlighting the ways in which the key election stakeholders utilized social media during the election. The task of this study is divided into six sections. Following this introduction is the second section that explores the meaning, attributes, and classifications of social media. A clear definition of our understanding of social media is pertinent considering that one can easily misconstrue social media to encompass only social networking tools like Twitter, Facebook, and Myspace. The third section analyzes the treatment of social media in the Nigeria’s electoral legal framework, particularly the Electoral Act 2010. This analysis will highlight the relevance of the Electoral Act 2010 in enhancing the use of social media. The fourth section of this study will examine the use of social media among key stakeholders in the electoral process, including INEC, politicians/political parties, the electorate, and CSOs. The fifth section will recap the main arguments of the study and reflect on wider issues emanating from the findings of the study, while the final section will proffer recommendations.

II. DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

The term ‘Social Media’ has been defined in different ways by its users, ICT experts, and authors. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content”. It includes web-based and mobile based technologies that are used to turn communication into interactive dialogue among individuals, organizations, and communities. Typical examples of social media platforms include websites such as Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Youtube and the interactive options on these websites, such as the “re-tweeting” option on Twitter. These instruments are referred to as media because they are tools which can also be used for the storage and dissemination of information, however unlike the traditional media like Television and Radio, most of the social media tools allow their users to interact as “re-twitting” on Twitter and “comment” options on Facebook illustrate.

Looking at social media from a more practical point of view, Sweetser and Lariscy (2008: 179) define social media as a “read-write Web, where the online audience moves beyond passive viewing of Web content to actually contributing to the content”. One thing that is common in most definitions of social media is the point that it is based on user-generated
participation. The opportunity to enjoy user-to-user interaction distinguishes social media from the traditional media which is characterized by top-down news dissemination arrangement (Clark and Aufderheide 2009). Another attribute of the social media which distinguishes it from the traditional media is the choice it accords to its users. Choice enables people to access the information they like to learn about through the social media, eliminating the gatekeeper role of traditional media. On one hand, the choice offered by social media reduces the shared experience that viewers of particular traditional media channels usually have; on the other hand, it creates a network of individuals with like interests and similar preferences.

Two primary tools that have enabled people to socialize and connect with each other online are social networking sites and electronic messaging. More than half of America’s teens and young adults send electronic messages and use social networking sites, and more than one-third of all internet users engage in these activities (Jones and Fox 2009). In Nigeria, over 3 million people have Facebook accounts, while about 60,000 people are on Twitter (Asuni and Farris 2011: 4). Most people who use social media tools access them mainly through computers and mobile devices such as phones and Tablet PCs. Analysts suggest that majority of phone purchases in the coming years will be more for using online networks rather than making phone calls (Baekdal 2008). Thus, phone communication is now tending toward one-to-many sharing rather than the usual one-to-one conversation.

Social media technologies take on different forms including magazines, internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, podcasts, pictures, and video. Considering that social media come in diverse forms, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) tried to classify social media into six distinct categories:

- Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)
- Blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter)
- Content communities (e.g. YouTube)
- Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook)
- Virtual game worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)
- Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life)

Out of these six categories of social media tools, three categories (blogs and microblogs, content communities, and social networking sites) are the ones that are most relevant to the
application of social media in the electoral process. In the process of political communication, there has been strong intermediation between the traditional media and the three categories of social media mentioned above. Traditional media channels, particularly television and newspapers, try to expand their reach by using social media platforms for news broadcast. In Nigeria for example, many newspapers like Guardian, Vanguard, Daily Trust, and ThisDay as well as television stations like Channels, have Facebook and Twitter accounts. A common trend among traditional media houses, especially the television stations, is to have i-reporters. I-reporters are individuals without professional experience of journalism, but who can utilize their dexterity in the use of social media tools to broadcast messages about events taking place around them through the traditional media. I-reporters share pictures and videos of events with the public through the television. In this way, the traditional media rely on users of social media for news, information and leads, the same way that social media utilize news and information emanating from newspapers, radio and television channels.

Social media has shaped political communication in four major ways. Firstly, it has deepened segmentation of audience triggered by the rise of network television channels and specialized magazines and websites. Segmentation of audience is a product of two main elements of the social media: diversification of coverage and selective exposure (that is, finding information that aligns with the predispositions of individuals) (Stroud 2008). Social media makes it possible for its users to read and discuss specific issues and then connect with other individuals who share their beliefs. This has the possibility of creating individual voters that are fixated on specific issues and who may not be able to relate with the wider issues that are part of a general election. The existence of different media and brands of information platform can slit political communication into different segments - all addressing the same issues from different perspectives.

The second way social media has shaped political communication is by weakening the gatekeeping capacity of the traditional media. Before the emergence of social media, the traditional media played a key role in deciding what is sufficiently important to be aired to the public. This gatekeeper role of the traditional media enables it to set the agenda of public discourse. In the 1970s, McCombs and Shaw (1972: 177) asserted that “the mass media force attention to certain issues. They build up public images of political figures. They are
constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, [and] have feelings about”. McCombs and Shaw insist that a small number of mass media news producers dominate the market, and therefore, audiences only get information about what the media decides is important enough to be covered. By presenting politicians with a platform to speak directly to their constituents and potential voters without the traditional media intermediary, the social media has largely curtailed the agenda setting role of the traditional media (Gillin 2008).

Related to the weakening of the gatekeeper role of the traditional media is a third effect of social media on political communication. The practice of breaking news through the social media rather than press releases in the traditional media has gained currency in recent times. Press secretaries are increasingly losing their control as gatekeepers, and individuals now have more liberty to frame and prime issues they consider important. In all, the use of social media limits the control of traditional press secretaries over the outflow of information, and also decreases the dependence on traditional media for up-to-date content. Although the lack of control over the content of social media may be positive in the sense that it allows for greater freedom of information, there are also the dark sides of this phenomena. The social media has been misused in many ways including using social media platforms to spread false information, abuse political opponents, and incite violence. This, therefore, highlights the need for a reflection on how to balance individual freedom and responsibility in the use of social media. Social media outlets have a responsibility to develop and implement social networking guidelines for their users.

Finally, social media has emerged as the new influencer in social, economic and political settings. Research has shown that increasing use of social media for political communication has led to declining newspaper readership and television viewership in many countries (Australian Media and Communication Authority 2007). Under this circumstance, the social media may likely continue to dominate political communication, and to serve as a tool for gathering and disseminating political messages.
III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTIONS

Electoral Act 2010 is the legal framework that governs the conduct of elections in Nigeria. However, the Act did not provide specific guidelines on the use of social media in elections. Instead, it contains a number of sections that made references to the use of electronic media in the conduct of elections. These include:

- Section 100(4) of the Electoral Act 2010 which allows for the use of public electronic media for electioneering campaigns.
- Section 101(1) which prohibits the broadcast, publication, advertisement or circulation of any campaign material over the “radio, television, newspaper, magazine, handbills, or any print or electronic media whatsoever called” during 24 hours to the opening of polling.
- Section 154 which empowers INEC to make use of electronic media to conduct civic education and public enlightenment.
- Section 34 which requires INEC to “publish by displaying or causing to be displayed at the relevant office(s) of the Commission and on the Commission’s website, a statement of the full names and addresses of all candidates standing nominated”, at least thirty days before the day of the election.
- Section 71 which requires INEC to “cause to be posted on its notice board and website, a notice showing the candidates at the election and their scores; and the person declared as elected or returned at the election”.
- Section 56(2) which states that INEC “may take reasonable steps to ensure that voters with disabilities are assisted at the polling place by the provision of suitable means of communication, such as Braille, large embossed print or electronic devices or sign language interpretation, or off-site voting in appropriate cases”.
- Section 52(1) (b) which states that “the use of electronic voting machine for the time being is prohibited”.

A close look at the way the term “electronic media” was used in the Electoral Act indicates that the Act is mindful of the opportunities provided by the electronic media and that it considers electronic media to be crucial in four major areas. Firstly, the Electoral Act envisages a key role for electronic media in campaigning; that is why it allows for use of
electronic media (and by implication social media) in campaigns. Secondly, the Act anticipates that INEC’s capacity to provide civic education and enlightenment can be improved by the use of electronic media. Thirdly, the Electoral Act sees a role for electronic media in improving the transparency of the electoral process – this explains the requirement that vital information be disseminated through INEC’s website. Finally, the Act considers electronic media a useful tool that can be used to facilitate the participation of various segments of the society, particularly of People Living with Disabilities (PWDs), in the electoral process. This explains the provision which encourages INEC to provide electronic devices that could assist PWDs at the polling stations. One overarching point that can be drawn from the foregoing analysis is that there is a positive outlook for the use of electronic media to enhance the efficiency of the electoral process.

This positive outlook is however dimmed by the conservative stance of the Electoral Act on the issue of electronic voting, which is the highpoint of e-electioneering. Section 52(1) (b) of the Electoral Act prohibits the use of electronic voting machine. Many observers see this action as a contradiction of the positive inclination that the Electoral Act has shown towards electronic media. But a deeper consideration of the reasons for the prohibition of electronic voting in Nigeria would point to fears by some politicians that electronic voting machines could be subjected to abuses, and considering the level of technological advancement in the country, security agencies and the judiciary may not be able to respond to such abuses.

Although the Electoral Act referred to some of the core issues relating to the use of electronic media in elections, yet, some vital elements did not receive attention. For example, Section 100 of the Electoral Act provides the guidelines for election campaigns, outlining regulations of the use of media during campaigns. Many expect the Electoral Act at this point to provide specific guidelines to govern the use of social media in elections. But that section was silent on the use of social media. As the experience of the 2011 elections has shown, social media has become a crucial tool for political campaigns as increasing number of politicians and political parties are creating websites, utilizing electronic messaging and social networking tools. INEC therefore needs to begin early to regulate the use of social media in elections in order to ensure that the Commission is not overwhelmed by the rapid evolution of social media technology.
IV. USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA BY KEY ELECTION STAKEHOLDERS

Four key stakeholders in the electoral process (the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), politicians/political parties, the electorate, and Civil Society Organizations) made extensive use of social media during the 2011 elections. Each of these stakeholders used the social media to achieve a number of interrelated objectives. For INEC, social media was basically deployed to share information on the elections and receive feedbacks from the public on the performance of election officials. Politicians/political parties used social media primarily to reach out to the voters and canvass for support. The voters used social media to report their experiences and receive election related information. Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) used social media tools to mobilize and educate the electorate as well as to cover and report the outcome of their monitoring of the electoral process.

Part of the criticisms against INEC’s handling of the 2007 elections was that the Commission could not sufficiently engage with other stakeholders in the electoral process. INEC’s inability to fully demonstrate its willingness to receive and respond to concerns raised by candidates, electorates and election observers was particularly criticized. To ensure that this flaw was not repeated in the 2011 general elections, INEC established new (and strengthened existing) channels of communication between it and other election stakeholders. One major step taken by INEC to deepen communication between it and other election stakeholders was the revamping of its website. INEC refurbished its website to include strategic communications network. Volunteers from a civil society organization, Enough is Enough (EiE), worked with INEC staff to establish a social media structure including setting up of Facebook, Twitter and Youtube platforms to allow for open interaction between INEC and other election stakeholders. INEC also established a Situation Room, equipped with direct telephone lines, to enable people lay complaints and express concerns about the handling of the elections by officials at local and national levels.

Social media helped change the way INEC communicated with the public. Through its enhanced communication channels, reports from distant polling units could easily reach INEC officials and responses received within a reasonable time. This perhaps explains why more than 70,000 people were able to contact INEC directly to report incidents and have their
questions answered, while the Commission also received about 4,000 Tweets and 25 million hits on its website in three days during the presidential election alone (Asuni and Farris 2011: 10, 18). INEC’s use of social media during the 2011 elections significantly strengthened the Commission’s capacity to receive and respond to the concerns of election stakeholders during the general elections. Furthermore, the willingness of INEC to receive and act on information encouraged Nigeria to participate actively in the 2011 elections.

It was not only INEC that tapped into the opportunities provided by social media for greater and more efficient political communication. Politicians and political parties also utilized the social media largely to engage with voters and constituents. Many candidates that contested the 2011 general elections had Facebook, Twitter, and/or Youtube accounts. President Goodluck Jonathan was among the candidates that used the social media early in the race. President Jonathan made a remarkable move by announcing his intention to run for Presidency on Facebook. Bearing in mind the heated arguments that characterized the debate on whether President Jonathan should contest in the 2011 elections or not, the Facebook announcement by President Jonathan attracted a stream of messages on his Facebook page. Other candidates that significantly made use of social media include Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) gubernatorial and presidential candidates, Babatunde Fashola and Nuhu Ribadu, respectively; Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) presidential candidate, Muhammadu Buhari; and National Conscience Party (NCP) presidential candidate, Dele Momodu. In fact, the Social Media Tracking Centre, an independent ad hoc centre set up to track the use and effect of social media during the 2011 elections, rated Goodluck Jonathan, Nuhu Ribadu, and Babatunde Fashola as the top three users of Facebook, while Dele Momodu, Babatunde Fashola, and Muhammadu Buhari were adjudged top three users of Twitter during the 2011 elections (Asuni and Farris 2011: 9). These politicians primarily deployed social media tools towards broadcast of messages and engaging the voters.

The 2011 elections demonstrated the extent to which the social media has penetrated the urban populace in Nigeria. Estimates indicate that “out of approximately 150 million Nigerians, 87 million own mobile phones that can send and receive SMS messages and 44 million have internet access” (Asuni and Farris 2011: 4). The benefits of the penetration of social media in Nigeria came to light during the 2011 elections. Nigerian citizens of all ages,
education levels and from different parts of the country used and were mobilized through the use of social media to participate in the 2011 general elections.

The Nigerian electorate used social media in two major ways during the 2011 elections. Firstly, social media was used to mobilize both the “online” and “offline” electorate during the elections. CSOs, politicians, political parties, GSM service providers, as well as the electorate themselves passed on messages through various electronic channels mobilizing the citizens to participate in the electoral process and ensure that their votes count. However, a more interesting aspect of the political mobilization that took place during the 2011 elections was the extraordinary propensity of social media users among the electorate (online electorates) to pass on the information they have received through the social media to the sections of the electorate that are not connected to the social media (offline electorates). Anyone that knows Nigeria would know of the amazing ability of Nigerians to talk to each another in the markets, “newspaper stands”, bus stops, schools, workplaces, bars and restaurants, as well as in their homes. This gregarious attitude of Nigerians helped to reinforce the messages that were sent through the social media. In this sense, there were very high tendencies for messages transmitted through the social media to quickly reach the offline electorates. This broke down the gap between “online” and “offline” electorates, and enabled messages circulated through the social media to rapidly and easily penetrate the rest of the society.

Secondly, social media enabled the electorates to serve as “citizen journalists” or "citizen observers" during the 2011 elections. Citizen journalists or observers are simply individuals that actively participated in observing, documenting and reporting major events in the society such as elections. The emergence of social media enabled untrained citizens to cover and share their election experiences in audio, text, photographs and video. Citizens were used as i-witnesses by the traditional media – television, radio and newspaper houses. They also served as key informants to political parties and civil society organizations. On their own, some electorates engaged with INEC and other election stakeholders such as Nigeria Police and National Civil Defence Corps, using the hotlines and other communication channels provided by these agencies.
Civil society organizations (CSOs) are the last major election stakeholder that significantly used the social media during the 2011 general elections. Several CSOs in Nigeria created social media platforms through which they shared information and engaged with the electoral process. One major innovation by the CSOs during the 2011 elections was the creation of crowd-sourcing platforms that allow users to share information on the election using electronic messaging tools like email, text messages, or web contact forms. These platforms were used as a novel way to collect grassroots observer reports about timely distribution of election materials, prompt commencement of the voting procedure, the conduct of election officials, incidents of violence, and overall administration of the polling stations. Indeed, the social media revolutionized the efficiency of election observation by increasing coverage and reporting while minimizing costs. By increasing transparency and accountability, social media promoted the credibility of Nigeria’s electoral process.

The outbreak of violence in the aftermath of the 2008 Kenyan elections led to the development of *Ushahidi* as an accessible and free platform to monitor elections. *Ushahidi*, which means “testimony” in Swahili, was a website that was initially developed to map reports of post election violence in Kenya¹. *Ushahidi* uses a crisis-mapping software to collect eyewitness reports of violence sent in by email and text-message, and inputs them on a Google map. The software further aggregates and organizes the data into a map or timeline². The *Ushahidi* platform was replicated in several countries, including Lebanon, Uganda, Egypt, Liberia, Armenia, and India, to monitor the quality of elections.

During the 2011 elections, *Reclaim Naija* was set up by the Community Life Project in Lagos as an election incident reporting system built on the *Ushahidi* platform. The *Reclaim Naija* platform allows Nigerians to report incidents of violence and electoral malpractices through text messages. The messages received were to be plotted on an interactive map. Between the National Assembly elections of 9 April 2011 and the presidential election of 16 April 2011, citizen observers submitted 6,000 incident reports to the platform (Harwood 2011). The *Reclaim Naija* platform was also used to report incidents and progress during the voter registration exercise in January 2011. The reports sent through *Reclaim Naija* were collated in real time and fed back to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This

¹ See [http://ushahidi.com/about-us](http://ushahidi.com/about-us)
² See Ushahidi Company Profile on [http://www.technologyreview.com/tr50/ushahidi/](http://www.technologyreview.com/tr50/ushahidi/)
assisted INEC in troubleshooting in many locations across the country. The information was also useful to the media in monitoring and publishing stories on the voter registration exercise, thereby helping to amplify the voice of the people. In addition, the Reclaim Naija website serves as a one-stop online resource for information on the 2011 elections. It features all the polling units, senatorial districts and wards, the Nigerian Constitution, information on candidates, the 2010 Electoral Act, the election timetable, electoral guidelines, certified voters’ registration figures, political parties as well as civic and voter education modules.

Besides the Reclaim Naija project, a coalition of internet-savvy Nigerians known as Enough is Enough (EiE) initiated a number of projects to mobilize young Nigerians through electronic platforms to demand for credible elections. The core of EiE’s activity is the Register, Select, Vote, and Protect (RSVP) campaign which is designed to mobilize the youths to participate in the 2011 elections by using “Tweets and Facebook messages to whip up interest and then have people go out to register and vote, and they will then use the same tools to report on their activities so we can create an online buzz that inspires more offline action” (cited in Harwood 2010). The RSVP campaign involved mobilizing voters by organising civic enlightenment rallies in Abuja and Lagos via online channels and working with celebrities in conducting voter education through the use of online campaigns.

Enough is Enough (EiE) also built a mobile phone application for election mapping known as Revoda. Revoda made it possible for users to register their phone numbers with a particular polling unit, so that reports made about the polling unit could easily be authenticated and
followed up by INEC (Asuni and Farris 2011: 2). As at June 2012, Revoda had been downloaded almost 10,000 times. This application made it possible to document logistical deficiencies and fraudulent behavior during the 2011 elections. The EiE coalition further worked with INEC to set up Facebook and Twitter accounts that allowed for the open exchange of information, ideas and comments between INEC and other election stakeholders. EiE also established a Youtube platform where videos of important events are shared with the public. This action promoted a certain level of transparency in the electoral process as ordinary citizens who have not been trained to partake in the monitoring of the electoral process, could capture an event happening on their mobile phones and upload it on these platforms, and within seconds it goes viral.

Another example of efforts by the civil society to cover and report the 2011 is the IAmLagos Project. The goal of IAmLagos Project was to collect and report election results from polling units in Lagos State within the period of elections. The project tried to systematically contact voters in all the wards throughout Lagos State who can post election results to a reporting platform. Participants in the IAmLagos Project were mobilized and sensitized through SMS, radio and email messages. The Project also reached out to the public through its Facebook page, Twitter hash tag, website and call centre. The Social Media Tracking Centre considers the IAmLagos Project to be “very effective in improving social media coverage of polling units in Lagos with 80% coverage achieved during the gubernatorial elections” (Asuni and Farris 2011:11).

The IAmLagos Project mirrors Project 2011 Swift Count, a countrywide project aimed at using ICT to monitor and report elections. Project 2011 Swift Count was executed by a coalition of four CSOs, including Federation of Muslim Women’s Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), Justice, Development and Peace/Caritas Nigeria (JDPC), Nigeria Bar Association (NBA), and Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), with the technical assistance of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). The goal of Project 2011 Swift Count was to obtain and share with the Nigerian public both qualitative and quantitative data and analyses regarding the 2011 elections in real time using SMS text messaging. This information would create the possibility to verify the accuracy of results announced by INEC based on a statistical sampling of polling sites across Nigeria.
The extensive use of social media during the 2011 elections forced the traditional media to diversify their information gathering and dissemination methods. The traditional media houses relied widely on information provided by citizen journalists for their coverage of the 2011 elections. In addition, reporters employed by these media traditional institutions used electronic messaging tools like SMS, email and blackberry messenger to share their reports. In order to reach out to various election stakeholders, traditional media houses adopted an innovative means of interacting with the public through the use of social media. For example, Channels Television delivers daily news updates through an online application that can be downloaded on Androids, Blackberries, iPads, and iPhones from the Television’s website. Daily Trust newspaper which has been on Facebook since June 2010, delivered news updates (with links to its website) to an estimated 89,000 Facebook fans (Asuni and Farris 2011:10). There is also provision for the traditional media houses to receive online comments and feedbacks from the audience. This way, the distinction between traditional media and social media was greatly reduced.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This study contends that the significant use of social media during the 2011 general elections in Nigeria was a result of three key factors, namely: 1) the tendency of election stakeholders in Nigeria to follow the global trends in the use social media as a political communication tool, 2) the tendency of Nigerian politicians and political parties to tap into the opportunities offered by social media to reach and engage their constituents and voters, and 3) the tendency to use of social media tools to improve the efficiency of election observation. The study argues that the four key stakeholders in the Nigerian electoral process (the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), politicians/political parties, the electorate, and Civil Society Organizations) made extensive use of social media during the 2011 elections. Each of these stakeholders used the social media to achieve a number of interrelated objectives. INEC used social media basically to broadcast messages on the elections and receive feedbacks from the public on their experience with the process. Politicians/political parties used the social media to reach out to the voters and canvass for support. The electorates used social media to report their experiences and receive election related information, while the CSOs used the social media to mobilize and educate the electorate as well as to cover and report their observation of the electoral process.
There are many questions about the reliability of the information collected and shared through the social media, especially in highly disputed contests as Nigeria’s presidential election. Crowd-sourcing often relies upon information provided by grassroots citizens in the local communities, who are sometimes anonymous reporters. Bearing in mind that some of these citizen journalists might be people with partisan interests, it is difficult to affirm the accuracy of the reports without subjecting them to a systematic verification process. Reliability improves if independent verification checks are built into the system; for example, if a random sample of reports are vetted by trusted and independent agency, or if reports from multiple sources such as CSOs, local and international observers, election officials, security personnel and the media, are compared. Information shared through the social media during the 2011 general elections passed through only little or no form of vetting or verification.

The absence of censorship in the use of social media which in itself is a major appeal of this political communication tool may also be its albatross. Thus, although social media was exploited for good during the 2011 elections, it was equally misused. Attahiru Jega, Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) argues that while social media “provided a vehicle for the unprecedented mobilization of the emergent generation of youths in the political process” it was also used as a vehicle for spreading false information such as the several false alarms that were sent to INEC’s Situation Room (Amuchie 2012).

Unethical use of social media also reflects in the activities of some campaign groups who misused popular names in a bid to attract large following. One illustration is a Facebook campaign page called “Save Nigeria”, which mimicked the pro-democracy group - “Save Nigeria Group”, but failed to indicate early that it is a campaign page of a notable presidential candidate. Many people followed that page believing it was that of the “Save Nigeria Group”, only to receive a message afterward informing them that the page had become an election campaign group (Ekine 2010). Another form of abuse of popular names is the creation of several Facebook and Twitter handles with names of popular individuals. There were seventeen Facebook groups with the name of Goodluck Jonathan, however only two appear to be directly linked to him. There were also links between Nigerian government website and the campaign website, Twitter and Facebook pages of President Goodluck Jonathan (Ekine
Ibid). As one analyst have noted, while there may not be evidence of intentional deception, the connections between the federal government site and the on-line campaign platform of the President suggests incompetence, and perhaps lack of probity (Ekine Ibid).

The most disturbing form of abuse of social media during the 2011 general elections is the use of social media tools to incite violence. Rumors and inflammatory messages spread through electronic messaging tools were part of the triggers of the 2011 post-election violence that resulted in loss of lives and destruction of properties (Harwood and Campbell 2010). Inflammatory rhetoric sent via the social media worsened the tensions created by religious and ethnic campaigning by supporters of President Jonathan in the South and followers of Muhammadu Buhari in the North. Three days after the parliamentary elections, the spokesman of Nigeria’s Vice President alleged that “some people have been going around in the North warning that any Muslim that votes for PDP or any other party outside CPC (Congress for Progressive Change) is not a genuine Muslim and will be punished for that” (Omokri 2011). There were also SMS that attempted to stir up Muslims against President Jonathan and Northern Muslim governors perceived to be supporting him. The anti-Jonathan rhetoric in the North hardened the stance of many Southerners against Buhari, setting up an inevitable clash between followers of Buhari and Jonathan that has left Nigeria divided into two - along religious and regional lines.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the challenges and opportunities of the use of social media in elections, we recommend as follows:

1. The benefits of the use of social media outweigh its risks, as such the civil society should plan to use and equally encourage other election stakeholders to use social media in the subsequent elections in Nigeria.
2. INEC should establish guidelines for the use of social media as a political communication tool in Nigeria.
3. INEC, CSOs, and security agencies should establish modalities to systematically verify information reported by citizen observers through the social media.
4. INEC should establish a social media tracking centre to monitor, collate, and interpret trends and reports during elections.
5. Development partners should support domestic observer groups to utilize social media as a means of improving election observation in Nigeria.

VII. REFERENCES


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