

**USING THE UNFETTERED MEDIA IN AFRICA'S FRAGILE DEMOCRACY: ISSUES,
DANGERS AND THE WAY FORWARD**

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Abstract

The use of social media for political participation has continued to grow across the globe. Since Barack Obama broke the world record in the history of social media use for political purpose during the 2008 US presidential elections, many nations and politicians have continued to cue into the platform to galvanize citizens and candidates towards active participation in the political process. There is no doubt that social media are unfettered, uncensored and unregulated in most African countries. This work examines the implication of using such media genre in political participation in Africa's fledgling and fragile democracies. The study investigates the issues involved within the framework of the Social Network and the Gate-Keeping theories. The study notes that social media are essential in the success of elections and sustenance of the fledgling democracies in the continent, but the issue of regulation remains a major challenge. The work recommends among others, greater adoption and use of social media in the democratic process in the continent and establishment of strict monitoring mechanisms to curtail the weaknesses and maximize the benefits of the technology in the democratic process in Africa.

Key Words: Unfettered Media. Africa. Fragile Democracy. Dangers. Way Forward.

Introduction

The advent of social media has added great impetus to human communication. This is because the technology is participatory, interactive and cost-effective. This has barely made everyone who can use it a mass communicator. This perhaps brings to fulfilment the prediction of Marshal McLuhan in 1964 that the world would someday become a "global village" where what happens in one part of the world would be known instantly and simultaneously worldwide.

The arrival of social media in particular is perhaps the most phenomenal among various platforms of communication made available by the advance in Information and Communication Technologies. The possibilities they have created in human communication and interaction are beyond bounds. By just pressing a button today, one can stay right in his bedroom and access information, entertainment, events and enjoy full interaction with the world. Writing on this development, Adibe and Odoemelam (2011)

observe that the new media of communication have in no small measure helped the community to be aware of each other. Expounding on this, Baran (1998:63) writes that:

As the media shrink the world, people will become increasingly involved in one another's lives, and as people come to know more about others who were hitherto separated from them by distance, they will form new beneficial relationships.

This argument is relevant to this study as it draws attention to what social media are doing in the area of human communication, especially as it concerns the fostering of relations and interaction among people.

Social media are interactive, web-based media which belong to the new genre of media that focus on social networking, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information, as well as publish their own views on the Internet. Nations (2010) refers to these media as social instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instrument like newspapers. According to him, "they are channels of communication made possible by social interactions often among heterogeneous persons". These media, he believes, lay emphasis on dialogue or two-way-communication among senders and receivers. Kaplan (2010) concurs that social media are media designed to disseminate information through social interaction, using web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social dialogues.

In many parts of the world today, individuals, groups, organisations and even nations are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by social media and other e-media platforms to mobilize millions of people to support and advance their course. In the political sphere it has become a veritable tool for mobilizing citizens towards active participation in the political process and democratic projects.

Baran (2010) cited in Adelabu (2011) observes that the success of President Obama's Presidential campaigns in 2008 and his eventual emergence as first black president of the United States was largely credited to his active use of Facebook to mobilise millions of volunteers, and voters. This paper examines the implications of the increasing use of the unfettered social media platform in Africa's fledgling and fragile democracies.

The Problem

The use of social media as a formidable force for social engineering and political electioneering has continued to grow. The technology is participatory, interactive and cost-effective. This has made it the medium of the moment as far as political communication and participation are concerned. Many African countries are beginning to take seriously and use maximally the social media in their political process.

African democracy is usually considered nascent and fledgling when compared to the older and more stable democracies of the western world. Meanwhile, the continent has continued to embrace social media platform as instrument for political participation. The social media on the other hand are unfettered, unregulated and indeed a volatile platform to trend politics. The impact of the technology in the recent Arab uprising in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya is an eloquent testimony. Perhaps, this was what prompted Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe (2012:10), to conclude that "social media are technologies with double edges, quick and sharp, with positive and negative values". Agreeing with this, Adeyaju and Harana (2011:530) observed that during the 2011 electioneering in Nigeria, Facebook and GSM-SMS were used to disseminate provocative and inciting messages that are believed to have contributed to the violence and tensions witnessed before, during and after the elections in many parts of the country.

This gets a buttress from the findings of Adibe (2013:19) that during the 2011 general elections in Nigeria, social media were used to:

- i. attack opponents,
- ii. spread false rumours,

- iii. spread hate and inciting messages,
- iv. digitally manipulate images, messages and videos,
- v. hack into people's accounts,
- vi. launch virus attacks on opponents' information,
- vii. commit all manner of frauds, including making people fall prey to online scams that seemed genuine, resulting in several data and identity thefts, etc.

The issue of concern here is the looming dangers the technology portends for the fragile and fledgling democracy in Africa due to the weak or absence of regulation of the platform. This fear had earlier been expressed by Kidafa, Odoemelum and Elechi (2011) when they observed that "regulating traditional media in the face of issues like obscenity, copyright, right to privacy, etc, was upheaval, but has become more difficult with the emergence of social media". Indeed, the increasing use of social media and other online tools has led to greater privacy and security challenges. This is to say that with the great potentials of the Internet and other digital social media platforms, comes the challenge of monitoring and regulation if the observed benefits would be enduring.

The relevance of this observation to this discourse is that the new found media require some sort of regulation if our society must not fall beyond the short, nasty and brutish clime described in George Orwell's animal farm which according to Kidafa, Odoemelum & Elechi (2011) prompted Ekwe, et al (2009) to propose for the anarchical theory of the media. The theory according to them foresees a society in chaos owing to disorder in seeking, receiving and disseminating of unfettered information.

Theoretical Base

The study is anchored on the Social network and the Gate-keeping theories.

The Social Network theory

This theory explains the mechanisms by which social interactions can promote or inhibit individual and collective behaviour. The theory according to Israel (1985) cited in Imoh (2007) emphasizes the importance of "social network" which refers to the set of linkages and social relationships between/among members of society. Applied to this study, the theory provides an explanation as to how social media work in fostering social interactions that in turn influence societal action especially in elections, sustenance of democracy and fostering of good governance in Africa.

The Gatekeeping Theory

This theory was coined by Kurt Lewin in 1947 (Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso, 2008:91). The theory is concerned with the screening of information that is disseminated to the public. The concept of gate-keeping emanates from the understanding that apart from legal restrictions on what is to be published, including photographs, the communicator has the moral duty to be socially responsible to his audience in the content of his message. The relevance of this theory to the discourse is hinged on the fact that powerful tools like social media should have some sort of monitoring and regulatory controls against abuse.

The Method

This study is approached from the descriptive and analytical perspectives. Okoro (2001:53) explains that descriptive studies as the name implies are aimed at describing or explaining a given phenomenon. Yang (2010) adds that the difference between descriptive and analytic approaches is that while descriptive studies attempt to describe, determine or identify what is, analytical research tries to establish why it is that way or how it came to be. This is in agreement with the submission of Wimmer and Dominick (2006:179) that while descriptive research compares and describes what phenomena are, analytical research usually concerns itself with cause-effect relationships, and the result usually allows researchers to examine the interrelationship among variables and to develop explanatory inferences. This method is adopted to analyze and address the many questions that arise following the emergence of social media

especially as it concerns its use in political campaigns/advertising and the possible effects it could have on the fledgling democracies in most African countries.

LITERATURE/EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Social Media: A Conceptualization

Social media are interactive web-based media platforms that offer citizens opportunity and place to connect, share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, as well as other things like job and career tips. They belong to a new genre of media that focus on social networking which allow users to express themselves, interact with friends and share information with freedom as well as publish their views on issues on the World Wide Web. Mayfield (2008) describes these media as "online media that promote participation, openness, conversation and connectedness". Nation (2010) sees them as "social instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers or magazines. They are online content, created by people using highly accessible and a scalable publishing technologies to disseminate information across geographic boundaries, providing interaction among people. They support demonstration of knowledge and information, thereby making the people both information producers and consumers. This feature of making the people information producers and consumers is one of the distinguishing features of social media from traditional mass media that allow people to consume the contents only (Adelabu 2011). This is perhaps why Yap, B. (2009) in his paper "Time running out for newspaper" argue that the traditional media would someday give way for the new media technology.

Social media emerged with the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web. They are usually associated with the term "web 2.0" which is used to describe websites that provide opportunity for a user to interact with the sender of a message. According to Wikipedia (2012) "Web 2.0" refers to the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to "web 1.0" which describes the state of the web prior to 2004. Web-based communities, social networking sites video-sharing sites, Wikis, and blogs, are among examples of web 2.0 sites (Wikipedia 2012).

Abubakar (2011) observes that social media have created online platforms that serve as a new "political capital" where people resort to and participate in a political discourse. Kweon and Kim (2010:1) therefore, emphasize that social media have become a main source of personal orientation, anonymous interactivities and social community on variety of issues that involve politics and political discourse. Social media have the capacity of boosting participation because of its openness, conversational nature, connectedness, textual and audio-visual characteristics appeal (Mayfield, 2010 and Bradley, 2009).

The last few years have witnessed consistent growth in the use of social media platforms in Africa. Although, the level of adoption and use vary from regions and countries. Facebook is perhaps the commonest. (See table 1 below)

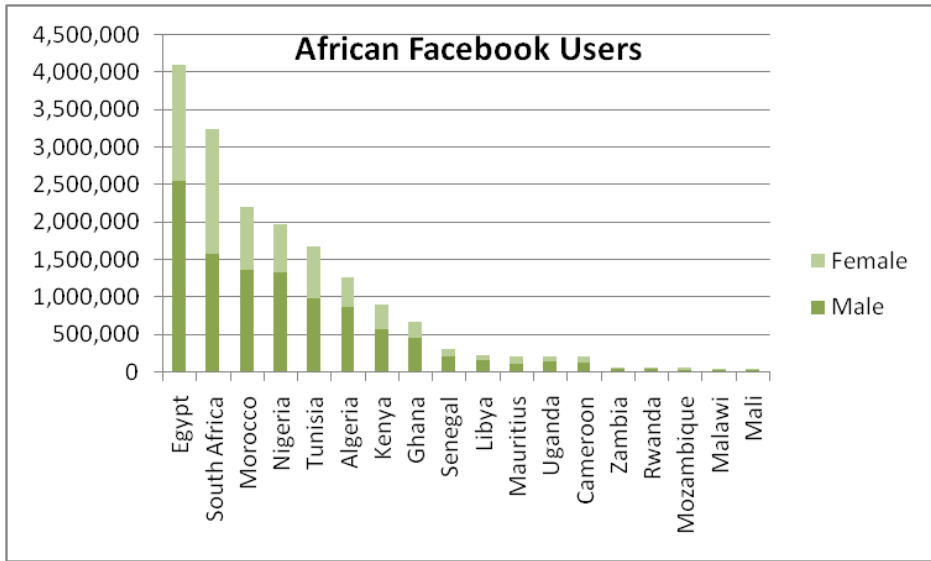


Table showing Facebook Users in Africa (gender disparity also indicated). Adapted from CP-
 AFRICA.COM

Apart from the popular facebook, other social media platforms include: Youtube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Myspace, Flickr, 2go, Blackberry Messenger (BBM),Google+, Friendster, hi5, yahoo, Delicious, digg, Reddit, Tumblr, StumbleUpon, MeetUp, etc, (see some of their symbols below)



Source: Wikipedia, 2012

Appraising the Fragility of Africa's Democracy

In many parts of the world today, democracy is acknowledged as the best form of government. Africa, though a late entrant, has continued to demonstrate great zeal and commitment towards establishing and strengthening democratic principles and institutions. Many countries in the continent including the Arab nations that hitherto saw democracy as an alien and American imposed syndrome are now rapidly joining the league of democratic nations. From Cairo to Cape Town,Lusaka to Lagos, Tripoli to Tunis, Monrovia to Malabo,Kampala to Kinshasha, Ouagadougou to Atananarivo,cities and citizens across the continent are embracing democracy as the best form of government.

Elections, which represent the most modern and universally accepted process through which individuals are chosen to represent a body or community in a larger entity or government is one of the cardinal features of democracy (Nnadozie, 2007:45). This is so because in a democracy, the authority of the government derives from the consent of the governed. This is perhaps why democracy is commonly referred to as "the government of the people by the people and for the people". Usually, a democratic election would characteristically be competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive and free and fair (Chukwu, 2007:75).

Democracy in Africa is nascent, unfettered, fragile and fledgling when compared with those of the western world. For instance, Nigeria became a Republic in 1963 but the United States attained that status in 1776. That year (1963), Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe became the President under the platform of the NCNC. His reign was short lived as he was overthrown in the January 15, 1966 coup d'etat. From 1966, it was from one military overthrow to another, until 1979 when General Olusegun Obasanjo voluntarily returned power to Alhaji Shehu Shagari, the civilian winner of the presidential election. The Second Republic lasted slightly above three years and it was aborted by another military coup d'etat in 1985. The period between 1983 and 1999 witnessed a series of military overthrows, as even the purported Third Republic could not materialize following the annulment of the June 12, Presidential election.

The Fourth Republic which came into being on 29 May, 1999 is about fourteen years now, but many still doubt its stability.

The tortuous journey to democracy is however not Nigeria particular, but indeed a major trait of Africa's democracy. Ghana, just like Nigeria had her first military coup in 1966 when Lt. Gen. Emmanuel Kwasi Kotoka led National Liberation Council brought down the government of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah (late), the first President of the Republic of Ghana. The country returned to democratic rule in 1969 with Dr. K.A. Busia, as president. Busia's reign, however, lasted for just twenty-six months as he was overthrown in another coup d'etat on January 13, 1972 by the Fifth Infantry Brigade of the Ghana Army led by the then Col. I.K. Achenampong. General Achenampong was deposed in a palace coup of July 1978 by General F.W.K. Akuffo. A year later in 1979, they returned to democracy as Dr. Hilla Limann of the People's National Party won a keenly contested national election. The Limann administration and the third Republican Constitution of Ghana were overthrown in yet another military coup in 1981. The government was subsequently overthrown by Lt. Jerry Rawlings who later turned to become a civilian president after winning the 1992 elections under the platform of the National Democratic Congress (NDC).

The last three years alone have witnessed multiple illegal and abrupt changes of government in Eritrea, Guinea Bissau, Ethiopia, Cape Verde, Mauritania, Niger, Guinea Conakry, Sao Tome and Principe, Ivory Coast, Mali, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, among others.

To say that Africa's democracy is fragile therefore is not an overstatement. "Fragility" (fragile) in our context is synonymous with flexible, weak and uncertain; easily bent, broken or damaged.

Social Media and Politics in Africa: A Few Cases

Before the advent of the new media, political campaigns and other electioneering activities blossomed in the traditional media. However, the arrival of social interactive media in particular has greatly affected the way the game of politics is played, and many democracies across the globe are responding to this great innovation.

The revolution began in 2008 when Barack Obama broke new grounds by using social media in his political campaigns in ways never practised before. Since then, many politicians and electorate alike are now seriously taking to social media for active political participation. In Africa, President Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria quickly comes to mind. Jonathan on Wednesday, September 15, 2010 took the extraordinary step of announcing his bid for the highest political office in the land on Facebook. He informed his 217,000 fans on the world's most popular networking platform of his intent: twenty four hours later, 4,000 more fans joined his page. By the day of the election, on 16 April 2011, he had over half a million followers (Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe 2012). In addition to the approximately 3

million registered Nigerians on Facebook and 60,000 on Twitter, almost every institution involved in Nigeria's elections conducted an aggressive social networking outreach, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, candidates, media houses, civil society groups and even the police.

Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe (2012) further observe that during the 2011 elections, many Nigerians were armed with their blackberries and Twitter feeds. They noted that, a 33 year old IT consultant and activist, Gbenga was one of such Nigerians. His team had designed a smart phone application called Revoda which allowed voters to instantly upload reports of delayed voting materials and intimidating gangs at their local polling stations to their database; a daily summary was then sent to Nigerian election officials and Western observers as well as posted on their Revoda website. This allowed many people within and outside Nigeria to follow the process. Pictures, details and videos from polling stations were quickly uploaded to Facebook and YouTube. Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe (2012) recount what Gbenga told The Punch of 17 April, 2010, inter alia:

... We've got one Blackberry video of a policeman who was evidently drunk and intimidating people, for those who want to go to court; they have got a lot of evidence...

Another group, "Reclaim Naija" used text messages and e-mail reports to compile a live online map of trouble-spots. There were also "Twitter activists" whose job were to look out for rigging and spread warning about bombings at polling stations. Adibe, Odoemelam, Orji-Egwu, Nwankwo and Nweze (2012) observed that this massive use of social media culminated in the success of the election acclaim to be the freest and fairest in the nation's political history..

In South Africa's 2009 general elections, Jacob Zuma of the ANC also officially confirmed his presence on Twitter, though he was relatively late compared to the micro-blogging site that his rival Helen Zille of the DA party had been using for a long time. Fleming, a social media consultant for Afrosocialmedia told "News 24" that "it appeared the DA modelled their campaign on US President Barack Obama's successful social media campaign".

During the pre-independence referendum in South-Sudan, social media played a massive role in the entire process. The people, especially the literate ones in the urban areas relied heavily on Facebook, Twitter and other social network platforms to make their voices heard on the political scene.

Perhaps what would remain for a long time in the history of social media use for political struggle in Africa was during the Arab spring in North Africa. In Tunisia where the popular protests began, the agitations were largely mediated through the use of Twitter, Facebook and blogs. Citizens demonstrated against government corruption, inequality, censorship and joblessness (even among the well educated youths). The protests began in December 2010 with a college-educated street vendor's (Mohamed Bouazizi) self-immolation in the coastal town of Sidi Bouzid in despair at the corruption and joblessness that pervaded the country. He died from the burns, but his protest, despite Tunisia's strict web censorship laws, was rapidly fanned by online Internet tools. The new arsenal of social networking helped accelerate Tunisia's revolution, driving the country's ruler for 23 years, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, into ignominious exile and igniting a conflagration that has spread across the Arab world at breathtaking speed (Adibe, et al, 2012).

Following the successful overthrow of Tunisia's Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, the protests spread to Egypt on January 25, 2011 where citizens took to the streets in protests against President Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule. While exact numbers of protesters could not be estimated, a flood of Internet photographs and videos showed a massive presence in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said and other Egyptian cities. While protests lasted, leaders and supporters of opposition used Twitpic, Facebook and YouTube to disseminate videos and photographs and call on Egyptians to join in the protest. Protesters provided minute-by-minute tweets concerning where to assemble in an effort to beat police intelligence.

On February 10, amidst unrelenting protests, Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that Mubarak had ceded power. On May 23, 2012, Egyptians had their historic election that saw the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood - Mohammed Morsi an elected replacement for Hosni Mubarak just one year after his departure. Morsi has however been ousted by the Egyptian military and replaced by the Chief Judge of the Supreme Constitutional Court, Mr. Adly Mansour.

In Libya, the situation was not quite different from the Egypt experience even though Muammar Gaddafi's government made all efforts to maintain strong control of the Internet infrastructure. But social media role later became more visible in the escalation of the protests as activist groups used the social network, especially Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to call for protest meetings and to inspire revolution/call for Gaddafi's resignation. On the morning of Thursday 20 October, 2011, Muammar Gaddafi was declared assassinated. In all these scenarios, the social media technology was quite instrumental. This is a clear indication that social media have become a virile instrument in the political process in Africa.

Issues and Challenges

From time immemorial, hardly has there been any human creation, innovation or discovery that did not come with some key challenges. Historians tell us that one of the earliest discoveries of man was fire, through striking together stones. Since then till date, fire has remained one of man's greatest enemies both in the life here and in the life hereafter.

As technology advanced, man made the automobiles, the locomotives, the submarines and the aircraft, just to mention but a few. These great blessings to society had at various occasions turned out a curse for the society they are meant to bless; and social media are no less an exception in this irony of life.

Our argument here is that the new found type of political activism and participation, propelled by social media force has the potentiality of truncating the fragile democracies in most parts of Africa. Agreeing with this, Adibe, et al (2012:13) in their hypothesis: "From Arab Spring to African Spring?" note that the increasing power of the unregulated and unfettered social media platform portends great dangers for the African continent. They observe that the social media which fueled and fanned the North African protests of 2010/2011 which brought down the governments of Zine el- Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and the Libyan former powerful leader, Muammar Gaddafi, have also aided similar violence and civil unrest in not less than 22 countries in Africa within a short period of two years.

Adeyanju and Haruna (2011:530) agree that during the 2011 electioneering period in Nigeria, Facebook and GSM-SMS and other social media platforms were used to disseminate provocative and inciting messages, attack opponents; spread false rumours, digitally manipulate images, messages and videos; hack into people's accounts; launch virus attacks on opponents' information; commit all manners of frauds that culminated in the post-election violence in some states of Northern Nigeria. Adeyanju and Haruna (2011:530-531) in Adibe et al (2012: 14) present some of such messages in the table below:

Message	Source	Date Circulated
Do not vote for a Muslim president. Muslims have ruled the Country for long. Christians in Nigeria must determine who the president of their country becomes. We have taken the back seat and allowed the Muslims to rule the Country for long due to disunity in the church	Forwarded by Concerned Citizen accessed 01/01/2011	1 st January, 2011
Message	Source	Date Circulated
A good Christian can never vote for a Muslim this 2011 election because a Muslim is a great enemy to Christian for that they will never smell this presidential seat for the next 20 years. This is a	Forwarded by anonymous	25 th January, 2011

Sunday message given to all Christians in Nigeria by Rev. Chukwuma Nwabara of Living Faith Church, Kubwa, Abuja		
Message	Source	Date Circulated
We call on all Christians to ensure that their votes count in the forthcoming elections. It is time for the son of God to dominate the land. We believe victory for Jonathan and Nigeria will be a nation 'under the rule of our lord Jesus Christ.	Coalition of Christian Politicians	10 th February, 2011
Message	Source	Date Circulated
It is the Igbos who need Buhari and not the other way round. The presidency is not a do or dies to Buhari. If he wins, good luck to Nigeria; if he loses, bad luck to Nigeria, and Igbos should forget the Northern votes for a long time. In the current voters registration, the North alone has 33 million voters, South East has less than 6 million.	Forwarded Message	11 th March, 2011
Message	Source	Date Circulated
Muslim brothers vote Sha'aban of ACN for Governor. CPC candidate, Haruna is not a Hausa Muslim, he and his running mate, J . D. Ephraim are from southern Kaduna	Muslim League	23 th April, 2011

Source:Adeyanju and Haruna (2011: 530-531)

From the table above, the picture perhaps becomes clearer that social media are volatile platform for politics. This goes to show that the technology portends huge threats to Africa, posing the challenge of monitoring and regulating their usage.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

This study has examined the implications of using the unfettered media in Africa's fragile democracies. We have also shown that the use of social media is fast becoming a common phenomenon in African politics, especially in the electoral process. This is evident from both local and general elections in several countries in the continent in the last few years and in the recent political developments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. We argue that as far as the doctrine of free flow of information is concerned; social media is the right technology. However, we did not fail to warn too, that social media are technologies with double edges, quick and sharp with positive and negative values. Be that as it may, the fact that social media have so numerous potentials that could be tapped to improve the game of politics, enhance the virtues of democracy and foster good governance and political stability in the volatile African continent, calls for full embrace of the technology. To that end, the study recommends government provision of a more conducive environment to foster penetration of social media and guarantee greater access to the technology.

The study also brought to the fore the problem of weak or no regulation of social media. To this challenge, the study suggests urgent review of media laws to address the technicalities involved in the newer technologies and that regulatory bodies should think of policy sub-sections on different types of

media such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, 2go, BBM, and indeed, blogging.

Specifically, the study recommends:

- i. Periodic public enlightenment on how to make the best use of social media platforms especially in the election process in the continent. Governments should be at the forefront of this campaign, using such instruments like the ministries of information at both state and federal levels, the mass media, among others.
- ii. Amenities should be provided to check politicians and political parties as well as their supporters from using social media spread false rumours, hate and inciting messages against their opponents, among others.

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