

Tweet to Trust: Social Media and Elections in West Africa

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ABSTRACT

Today is an exciting time to be a political activist in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly for the technically inclined. Online social media and other digital technologies are increasingly being used for political purposes. But this phenomenon raises the question of how, if at all, these new media actually perturb the political landscape. These questions have been well-studied in Western contexts, but remain relatively underexplored in developing regions where traditional media are often scarcer, democracies are younger, and the effect of social media on politics has the potential to be quite distinct. This paper explores these questions through a qualitative dual case study of social media use during general elections in Nigeria and Liberia in 2011. Participants suggested that social media helps to overcome previous scarcity of information during the electoral process, leading to increased transparency and reduced tension. Furthermore, social media-based monitoring shows encouraging signs of robustness concerning information quality and mobility. Together, these findings suggest that given sufficient civil-society coordination, social media can be an effective tool for electoral scrutiny and can help build public trust in the electoral process.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.m [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Miscellaneous

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

social media, elections, civic participation, Liberia, Nigeria

1. INTRODUCTION

Today is an exciting time to be a political activist in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly for the technically inclined. New media technologies including the mobile phone, the Internet, and social media are proliferating rapidly and widely, and civic groups of all stripes are adopting these technologies as a key part of their activism. Social media, which includes Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms, has emerged as a potent organizing tool. While 2012's Arab Spring in North Africa captivated the

world, similar campaigns have been occurring south of the Sahara both before and since.

The embrace of social media by political activists raises the question of how, if at all, these new media actually perturb the political landscape. Do they fundamentally enhance democracy or are they simply the totems of a younger elite (or both)? Are they a genuine threat to entrenched power structures or are they more likely to be co-opted by those same structures (or both)? These questions have been studied to a considerable degree in Western contexts, but remain virtually unexplored in developing regions where traditional media are scarcer, democracies are younger, and the effect of social media on politics has the potential to be quite distinct.

This paper explores these questions by focusing on one of the most important democratic events in any country, the general election. Opportunities abound for networked technology to bolster the democratic process in many African nations. Activists have employed various technologies for awareness building, voter education, results tracking, and combatting electoral malfeasance. Elections are also a boom time for discourse on social media in many African nations, as citizens review their electoral choices, encourage each other to vote, and report what they are seeing. Elections therefore serve as an excellent lens on the broader phenomenon of social media and politics.

We present a multiple case study of social media use during elections in Nigeria and Liberia in 2011, with a specific focus on how social media technology was used to monitor and observe the electoral process. We examine the broader media environment of the two countries, the nature of social election monitoring in each nation, and the ultimate effect of social media on the perception of the election by the general public.

2. PREVIOUS WORK

The academic literature examining digital election monitoring is limited. An early article by Glidden [19] noted the emerging trend of digital election monitoring in “developing democracies” and advocated international standards for the practice. Schuler reported on several years of work by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and its international partners using SMS as a conduit for the collection of election data from observers in the field on election day [31]. His work spanned many countries and exhibited increasingly advanced techniques, including the use of SMSes specially coded for automated recognition and tallying. A series of press articles, NGO reports, and blog posts have discussed SMS-based election monitoring as well [5, 16, 26, 34]. Ushahidi, the crisis mapping tool, has also been employed in this area, e.g. [2, 29].

A number of authors have considered the broader area of social media in political action and civic engagement. This has included work taking a generally positive position on the impact of social media in politics (e.g. [28, 32]), contrasting work that holds a negative view (e.g. [25, 20]). It includes the work of lawyers (e.g.

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[27]), political scientists (e.g. [10]) and communication theorists (e.g. [12, 9]). Review articles of this fulsome collection of scholarship have begun to emerge demonstrating the range and depth of research [17]. It is clear from these reports cited that digital election monitoring in developing contexts is a promising area of socio-technical innovation. However, these articles and reports are chiefly descriptive, focusing on the technologies used and occasionally the lessons learned. The present article is the first to examine the impact of social media on the electoral process in a developing democracy.

3. BACKGROUND

The present work concerns 2011 national elections in Liberia and Nigeria, two West African nations. The work also makes frequent mention of two civil society groups, Enough is Enough of Nigeria and the Liberia Media Center. The remainder of the section presents some background information on these nations and groups.

3.1 Liberia

Liberia is a small country of approximately four million. Long inhabited by a constellation of African tribes such as the Kpelle, Bassa, and Mandingo, it was founded as a modern state in 1847, the first independent state in Africa [11]. The country suffered two devastating civil wars from 1989–1996 and 1999–2003 in which nearly 250,000 people were killed and a further one-third of the population was displaced either internally or externally. A tenuous peace was established in 2003 and democratic elections were held in the fall of 2005 resulting in the selection of Africa's first elected female head of state, President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (see [13] for a thorough review of the Liberian conflict).

Liberia's technological capacity has been minimal owing to its still-recovering postwar economy [8]. Internet use was reported at 3% of the population in 2011 [22], among the lowest in the world. Nonetheless, use of social networking services, especially Facebook, has grown rapidly in recent years. People access their Facebook accounts through office connections or slow shared connections in Internet cafés. The vibrant diaspora community is also well represented online. A recently-landed submarine fiberoptic cable promises to further enhance connectivity in the area.

The 2011 elections in Liberia represented the first major electoral test of the fledgling post-war democracy established in 2005. President Sirleaf, stood for re-election versus a number of opposition candidates, Winston Tubman of the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC) foremost among them. After the first round, neither candidate had achieved the required 50% + 1 votes to win outright and a run-off was scheduled for November 8.

While domestic and international monitors reported no major problems with the election, Tubman's CDC party claimed that the vote had been manipulated and, after a series of negotiations, decided to boycott the run-off. On the eve of the run-off, a CDC protest clashed with police and a riot ensued. Police responded with live fire, killing at least one protester [1]. Following this incident, the sitting Sirleaf government acted to shut down four radio and three television stations considered to be pro-CDC, accusing them of broadcasting hate messages and inciting violence.

The turnout for the run-off was much lower than the first round as a result of the boycott. President Sirleaf claimed 91% of the vote to Tubman's 9%. Thankfully there was no further violence.

3.2 Liberia Media Center

The Liberia Media Center (LMC) is an independent media watchdog and support group that emphasizes the importance of plentiful and accurate media coverage to the health of Liberia's democracy. Its initiatives have historically included regular evaluations of the nation's newspapers, radio, and television stations, and training courses for Liberian journalists on various topics. More recently, the group seems to be involving itself in first-hand reporting activities. During the 2011 election, it organized a parallel vote tally in cooperation with a coalition of reporters from various news outlets who dispatched piecemeal results to the central office via specially coded SMS. The LMC also embraces Internet and social media technologies, and has been home to some of the most innovative efforts in Liberia in these areas.

3.3 Nigeria

Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa with over 160 million inhabitants, and like Liberia, it is also marked by a troubled political history. The country endured its own ruinous civil war from 1967–1970 and has passed through multiple transitions between civilian and military rule since becoming an independent state in 1960 [15]. Its experience with democratic elections has been marred by widespread fraud on most occasions. A notable exception to this tendency occurred in 1993's general election, widely considered at the time to have been the freest and fairest in the country's history. However, the results were annulled by the preceding military president, Gen. Ibrahim Babangida, on dubious grounds. Subsequent elections in 1999, 2003, and 2007 were viewed far less favourably by Nigerians and international monitors alike [14].

A key feature of Nigeria's political landscape is the persistent power struggle between the Muslim-dominated North and Christian-dominated South. This rift has historically been managed through an informal power-sharing agreement within the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) whereby the presidency alternates between Northern and Southern candidates every eight years. However, this order was disrupted in 2011 by the out-of-turn candidacy of Goodluck Johnathan, a Southerner and former vice-president who took office when then-president Umaru Yar'adua died in 2010.

Nigeria's technical infrastructure, while more extensive than Liberia's, still leaves much to be desired. Internet use stood at 28% as of 2011 [22]. The number of fixed Internet connections per 100 people was much lower, at 0.14 [21], suggesting that most Internet access in Nigeria is via shared connections (as in Internet cafés) and mobile data usage. But despite these issues of access, Nigeria boasts some of the highest social media usage on the continent [4, 33].

The 2011 elections in Nigeria were widely anticipated as years of troubled elections had reached a boiling point among the populace, most notably the youth. Digital technology also promised to have an important impact. Furthermore, the country's Independent National Elections Commission (INEC) was inspired fresh optimism following the hiring of a new, well respected chairman in Attahiru Jega.

According to the reports of international and domestic monitors along with discussions on social media, the election was not without irregularities—aside from the Suleja bombing, isolated incidents of multiple voting, underage voting, and voter intimidation were reported—but the result of the presidential

contest was widely held to be credible, thus representing an important democratic step forward for the country.

3.4 Enough is Enough

The frustration felt by Nigerians with the corruption and ineffectiveness of their government is evident in the name of this Nigerian pro-democracy group. Created in 2010, Enough is Enough (EiE) promotes good governance and public accountability in Nigeria by mobilizing young Nigerians of voting age (18–35), with an emphasis on the use of social media technologies. Several of the group’s leaders are among the best-known social media personalities in the country. It orchestrated a major voter education and election monitoring initiative in 2011, dubbed “RSVP” for Register (to vote), Select (your candidates), Vote, and Protect (your vote from fraud). This campaign had a strong presence on social media, and a special Social Media Tracking Center (SMTC) was also organized to monitor popular social media platforms for signs of trouble [3].

4. METHOD

The work reported here comprises a set of 27 semi-structured interviews carried out in Abuja and Lagos, Nigeria and Monrovia, Liberia. Data collection took place over a 2-week period in May/June of 2012.

Abuja and Monrovia are the capital cities of their respective nations, while Lagos is the financial capital of Nigeria, and its biggest city. These sites were chosen as they possessed the highest concentrations of social media and Internet users.

Interviews typically lasted about 45 minutes and were audio-recorded. Participants were not compensated. All interviews were conducted in English.

4.1 Selection Criteria

Participants were selected from three groups: 13 were prominent social media contributors, 8 were members of the Social Media Tracking Center (SMTC) or Liberia Media Center (LMC), and 6 were traditional media professionals. Some participants were members of more than one group. In the above tally we only count each participant once, as per their primary affiliation.

4.2 Sampling

Prominent social media contributors were identified through a frequency analysis of social media data collected from prominent Twitter hash-tags and Facebook Groups during the elections. The most prolific contributors within the dataset were those sought. Contact with identified contributors was initiated by sending them direct messages on Facebook or Twitter or by reaching them through known members of their social network. Not all those contacted replied. In all, 13 such contributors were interviewed.

Members of the SMTC and LMC were contacted through the leaders of the two groups, both of whom are known to the authors. Once again, not all those contacted replied. A total of eight such members were interviewed.

Traditional media professionals were contacted in a snowball-like manner through trusted informants who were also participants in the interview study. Several such informants are well-connected in the Liberian/Nigerian media communities and were able to arrange meetings or provide contacts. In all, six such professionals were interviewed.

In the case of all three groups, new participants were sought until interviews started to become repetitive and it seemed that most major phenomena had been covered.

4.3 Analysis

A combination of inductive and deductive processes, inspired by Grounded Theory [24, 7, 18], was used to analyze the data collected. Interviews were first transcribed. In a first round of a coding, transcriptions were read and salient passages were assigned codes. A second round of coding followed, in which the passages and selected codes assigned in the first round were re-read and iteratively grouped into categories. Categories were selected based on successive readings of the data. The chosen categories were then used to build the narrative that presents the results in the following section.

5. RESULTS

The results of the study are presented in the three subsections to follow. First, in the interest of establishing context, the comments of participants on the phenomenon of scarcity in the traditional media of the two countries are reviewed. Second, the transformative effect of social media on this preexisting condition of media scarcity is discussed. Finally, some of the common critical contentions around social media’s role in politics and election monitoring are considered with reference to the data.

5.1 Traditional Media Scarcity

The traditional media in Nigeria and Liberia, including print, radio, and television, suffer from fiscal stress that leave the industry in a state of scarcity. As one Liberian participant put it,

“If you look at the media landscape in Liberia, it’s undercapitalized. We are not being well paid.”

Liberia P8, Traditional Media Professional

While the situation in Nigeria is marginally better, the local news media is still relatively under-equipped. One Nigerian participant made reference to the fatal plane crash that occurred in Lagos days before our interview, saying:

“The only TV station that was able to get there on time was Lagos State Television. But if you watch the channel, the video quality was unbelievable. It was like you were doing video Skype with someone over dial-up.”

Nigeria P13, Prominent Social Media Contributor

In both countries, newspapers struggle to station reporters throughout the country due to the high cost of transportation:

“Because of the financial implications sometimes you have one reporter covering a very large area, which also is a problem in terms of gathering the news and being factual and punctual.”

Liberia P11, Traditional Media Professional

Many rural areas are sometimes even “inaccessible” due to bad roads, said one participant. In describing the media environment during the election, another Nigerian participant noted simply that, “Traditional doesn’t seem very powerful.” Meanwhile in Liberia, a participant said that on election day, no media houses had the capacity to assemble aggregated election results as polls closed, and instead were announcing piecemeal results from each polling station. The Liberia Media Center’s effort to announce aggregated results shortly after polls closed was the first in the country’s history, and was only possible due to international donor funding.

It appears, therefore, that as a networked public sphere emerges in Nigeria and Liberia, it does so in the context of a traditional media whose chief deficiency arises not from its dominance by powerful

media conglomerates nor its restriction by authoritarian regimes, but from a scarcity of resources, most likely resulting from the general economic duress of the region. The next section reviews evidence that social media is allowing such scarcity to be overcome.

5.2 Overcoming Scarcity

As participants tell it, the history of scarcity of information during elections in Nigeria and Liberia led to a host of problems with the process. But the emergence of social media and a networked public sphere in both countries for the 2011 elections seems to have counteracted several of those old problems. This section reviews three such themes: the watchdog role, the perception of transparency, and the defusing of tensions.

5.2.1 The Watchdog Role

In Nigeria, a nation that consistently ranks in the bottom quartile of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (and 25th out of 39 sub-Saharan African countries (Transparency International, 2012)), participants identified signs that a new culture of social media watchdogging is emerging, and the 2011 elections were a key moment.

Participants reported multiple incidents during the election that were picked up on social media. Perhaps most famously:

"One of funniest videos was two women in Port Harcourt thumb-printing multiple [ballot] papers. And it was funny, this was a video they had no idea anybody was recording, and the video came out [on Twitter]."

Nigeria P13, Prominent Social Media Contributor

A frame from the now-infamous video is shown in Figure 1. Several participants were struck by the visceral quality of the video, which put a rare image to an all too familiar act.

"That was evidence. This was more than somebody tweeting 'someone snatched a ballot box.' . . . just seeing that video, and seeing the potential of people actually using their phones to take videos, that also stood out."

Nigeria P15, Prominent Social Media Contributor



Figure 1: A frame from an infamous video clearly showing multiple voting or "thumbprinting" in Nigeria's 2011 election. (JujuFilmsProductions, YouTube)

In another incident, a participant who volunteered as an SMTC staff member told of a first-hand report he received from a National Youth Service Corps¹ member working as a polling

¹ The National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) is Nigeria's compulsory national service program. Members, often called "corpors," are often enlisted for help with running elections.

officer. The worker claimed to have been forced to register underage children to vote. He sent several photos of the voters to the SMTC.

In fact, many respondents mentioned reports by the so-called "corpors," who appear to have embraced social media technology fervently. Tragically, a number of youth corps members were killed in post-election violence in the North of the country. Several participants described a feeling of powerlessness in reading what would be their final posts. Several respondents made reference to the last Facebook post of one of the victims, which read as follows:

"Na wao! This CPC supporters would hv killed me yesterday, no see threat oooo. Even after forcing underage voters on me they wanted me to give them the remaining ballot paper to thumb print. Thank God for the police and am happy i could stand for God and my nation. To all corps members who stood despite these threats esp. In the north bravo! Nigeria! Our change has come." [23]

In some cases, the rapid reporting of incidents through social media seems to have had a positive effect. The multiple voting in shown Figure 1 is said to have been curtailed due to action over Twitter and the candidate supported by the act ended up losing (though the alleged culprits were not prosecuted). Another participant described seeing the beginnings of a common tactic in which a staged fight is a distraction for ballot box theft:

"I had to call the police guys in charge to say I have seen a picture of people fighting in such place. I'm not there but I have a picture. Please, can you verify. And truly, they got there and made some arrests and took the people away and restored order."

Nigeria P16, Prominent Social Media Contributor

The sum total of these acts of vigilance appears to be an expectation that cheaters will henceforth be forced to think twice. In describing yet another alleged act of malfeasance, one participant claimed that the flurry of discussion around the incident may have had a dissuading effect on others:

"You had over six polling units all inside a very rich man's compound . . . people were able to report such kinds of incidents. And then because so many people were reporting that and talking about that, it dissuaded many of those who had that kind of intention."

Nigeria P11, Prominent Social Media Contributor

Another participant echoed this sentiment in a more general way, citing the proliferation of camera-phones and social media as dissuading factors.

Overall, the apparent embrace of social media to fulfill a watchdog role in the election is one factor contributing to what many participants described as an increased measure of transparency in the process. The next section explores that perception in greater depth.

5.2.2 Perception of Transparency

In 2011, for the first time in some time, Nigerians were excited about an election. Several participants related this to their ability to make reports on what they saw. According to one participant, use of technology to this end abounded:

"I was doing video and picture, and everybody at my polling unit was saying 'Oh, yes, yes, good, good!'"

They were encouraged, they were excited. They thought maybe I was a media person. But then they saw there were like four or five of us doing that. And they were excited. . . . A lot of people were taking pictures. I'm sure more than a third."

Nigeria P13, Prominent Social Media Contributor

INEC, the Nigerian election management body, was also lauded by participants for its accessibility for questions and requests, and its provision of a steady flow of information, in stark contrast to previous years:

"In the past . . . when you want to make any complaint, you have to drive down to the INEC office, and it's election time, there are hundreds of people with similar complaints. Everybody's shouting, very rowdy, nobody attends to you, maybe there are policemen with horse whips, chasing people away. Now I just sit down and take my phone."

Nigeria P7, SMTC Member

The organization was no longer seen as a "black hole", in the words of one participant. Social media seems to have played a large part in this transformation from scarcity to plenty. INEC's embrace of social media technologies helped Nigerians get answers to their questions about the process, making them "very comfortable".

Many participants felt that this stance engendered a perception of transparency:

"Even from INEC, accepting that they had difficulties and needed help, especially in social media, and then putting information out there. I mean, it shows some form of sincerity and a little bit of transparency."

Nigeria P5, SMTC Member

One participant experienced this in an especially visceral way:

"Everything I saw I was following on my BlackBerry, on my Twitter, on my Facebook. So I felt more like I was there counting the votes with them. And I felt I was, you know, 'in it'."

Nigeria P10, Prominent Social Media Contributor

In addition to the availability of information, several participants emphasized the ability to make a report and receive a meaningful response as key to a sense of transparency. For instance,

"When you can report what's happening, it helps your own assessment of [the election's] transparency and credibility."

Nigeria P8, Prominent Social Media Contributor

This sense of transparency, in turn, seems to have translated into a perception of fairness and credibility for the elections as a whole. One participant discussed this effect in the context of election results, succinctly capturing the reassuring effect of social monitoring:

"Most of the organizations working on social media or online . . . knew that Johnathan had won with about 65%-67%, even before INEC released the results. So at end of the election there was a general acceptance that this result announced by INEC was true reflection of the outcome."

Nigeria P11, Prominent Social Media Contributor

So in summary, participants suggested that whereas previous elections in Nigeria had been plagued by a scarcity of information arising from a limited media industry and uncooperative election management body, in 2011, the picture had changed significantly. Thanks in part to judicious use of social media by both individual citizens and INEC for sharing information and reporting issues, participants reported increased transparency, fairness, and credibility in the process relative to previous years.

5.2.3 Defused Tension

While the 2011 Nigerian election was anticipated with excitement, the corresponding emotion in Liberia may have been closer to anxiety. The election was only the second since the end in 2005 of two consecutive devastating civil wars, and the first to be managed by the nation's own electoral commission (NEC). With the inexperience of NEC came heightened weariness of the potential for rigging and the violence by which it is often accompanied.

Several participants reported that the greater availability of information on social media on election day did much to mitigate this tension. This more abundant information took several forms. Perhaps most celebrated were the aggregated results provided by the Liberia Media Center (LMC) and posted on the LMC Facebook group and web site. One LMC staff member described the group's motivation for collecting the results:

"We all know that the NEC could not give results . . . on time because it would take like one or two days before they start coming out with provisional results. So LMC now says 'Hey, if we can even provide it as it comes in, that will help to keep people informed, and gradually they will also digest the result.'"

Liberia P6, LMC Member

The operative words here—"gradually", "digest"—evoke a calming influence. Another LMC staffer went a step further, saying that access to the results provided:

". . . a picture of the electoral process to [people] that helped probably to calm the tension that may have developed if that kind of indirect flow of information did not exist."

Liberia P4, LMC Member

Making reference to the Kenyan electoral crisis of 2007, he suggested that the results system contributed to the stability of the electoral process which did not "go up in flames like what happened in Kenya."

A participant not affiliated with the LMC also believed that the availability of early results via social media may have reduced the risk of violence:

"In my opinion social media influenced and cut down the scales of violence in the election. Because it was like I already know the figure of my political candidate. . . . I will say look, if you look on Facebook, the figures there almost the same as the NEC. So there is no need for violence . . ."

Liberia P3, Prominent Social Media Contributor

Aside from results reporting, one participant, a journalist, suggested social media may also have played a role in easing tensions immediately after the November 7 riot by providing a real-time account, including photos, of what transpired.

“There was this incident on the eve of the election wherein there was a very big riot at the CDC headquarters, a lot of people were injured, and there was even claims that people died. It was the social media that helped to quell the situation down by giving the real fact, by posting those photos that were necessary. . . . There was a very big chaos. But we on social media kept the people informed . . . ”

Liberia P5, Prominent Social Media Contributor

Of course it is difficult to say for certain whether information distributed through social media had any effect on the general perception of an election’s fairness or on the level of electoral violence. However, it does seem certain that many participants experienced a personal sense of relief in having newfound access to a rich source of fresh information about the election, and to a space in which comments and questions could be aired.

5.3 Signs of Robustness

The concept of social election monitoring tends to provoke enthusiasm in some camps and skepticism in others. This has resulted in a mostly healthy discourse, with some topics, such as reliability and accessibility, making frequent appearances (e.g. [35, 30]). This section seeks to inject a measure of nuance into some of these discussions by reviewing some encouraging signs of the apparent robustness of the social monitoring system that appeared in the data. Three phenomena are examined in particular: the civil society coordination efforts driving the system; the mobility of information beyond social media; and the use of cross-media triangulation to bolster reliability.

5.3.1 Civil Society Coordination

The data suggest that in both Nigeria and Liberia, the social election monitoring system was strongly influenced by coordinating efforts of one or more democracy-focused civil society groups that chose to embrace social media as a key part of their strategy.

The LMC in Liberia and EiE in Nigeria are examples of this arrangement. The EiE SMTC, for example, helped educate Nigerian Twitter users on what kinds of information to share about their voting experience. They also orchestrated a “Register-Select-Vote-Protect” (RSVP) campaign in an effort to mobilize youth. The campaign relied heavily on social media and urged young voters to be vocal online as they went through the process. One participant involved in the campaign described it this way:

“Social media from then became a focal point for mobilization as well. Some of us were involved in the RSVP campaign [which] became a way to get a lot more young people participating in the elections, registering to vote, becoming champions for youth participation.”

Nigeria P3, Prominent Social Media Contributor

Groups like Enough Is Enough reached out to Nigerian celebrities including music stars, to help promote their campaign. This also happened chiefly on social media. Celebrities offered to “follow back” Nigerians posting photos of their voter registration card, for instance. One participant claimed campaigns like these stimulated interest in protecting the process:

“On voting day, [the youth] were willing to report the process of voting. They were willing to report misbehaviour from any policeman, they would get his number and name . . . ”

Nigeria P7, SMTC Member

Information sharing between civil society groups was also a common theme. The SMTC had an especially close link with INEC as one of the SMTC volunteers was seconded to INEC’s social media situation room, where she managed the official Twitter and Facebook accounts of the organization, and facilitated information sharing between the two groups. The SMTC also “worked with the police” to share security related information. One particularly suspenseful case took place during periods of random violence following the election:

“They went to attack this girls’ hostel. And then a particular girl kept on tweeting that her sister is supposed to be here and she’s scared, she hasn’t heard from her, her number is not going through, and things like that. Then [the SMTC director] actually got in touch with her, and gave her the numbers to call so that they could get some policemen to that area, to try to quell the situation. . . . She called the police officers and they were able to get there in time and now she heard from her sister, her sister is fine. They got there just in time because if they didn’t get there who knows what would have happened. Most of these things, you know they are happening and people usually don’t know. Like the police officers don’t know, OK, this is happening here, but with social media she was tweeting about it and [SMTC director] could give her a number that she could call . . . ”

Nigeria P4, SMTC Member

This was one of several stories in which Twitter was employed as a source of succour, a practice made necessary by the non-existence or non-functioning of a national emergency services number akin to 911 in the U.S. and Canada. While Nigeria’s Office of the National Security Adviser had published a set of hotline numbers (as referred to in the above quote) before the election, the most effective system for distribution of those numbers turned out to be social media.

Meanwhile, a participant at a different organization said that they maintained a “direct line” to INEC. At still another civil society organization, a participant described an instance where a tip received through the organization’s SMS network was verified through Twitter and eventually led to a positive outcome:

“Someone SMSed that INEC officials and youth corpors who were coming with the electoral materials were kidnapped. First, we forwarded that information to INEC. Then we also put it on social media, Twitter, and then we were able to verify that it was true. . . . And the INEC also had to call the navy and the security agencies, and actually rescued those [people] because of that information.”

Nigeria P11, Prominent Social Media Contributor

This kind of cooperation was the result of significant pre-election planning. In Liberia, the main area of social media activity was the LMC Facebook group, created and maintained by LMC staff. One LMC participant outlined that group’s preparations:

“The interaction mainly was between LMC, CSO partners, and media. . . . We made several presentations with the Election Coordinating Committee, the civil society group [a local formal

election monitoring group]. We made several presentations in a lot of forums . . . ”

Liberia P2, LMC Member

An SMTC staff person described similar preparations in Nigeria, including a roundtable discussion with prominent stakeholders prior to the election.

Thus it appears that civil society groups in both countries were instrumental in fostering a culture of vigilance and vocality on social media, as well as harvesting and acting upon the reports and information shared by interested citizens. This fact, however, does not detract from the social, distributed nature of the monitoring effort. Rather, it shows that social monitoring can benefit from efforts to coordinate the work of monitoring that is distributed among both private citizens and civil society.

5.3.2 Information Mobility

Despite the rapid growth of social media in Nigeria and Liberia, access to the Internet in both countries remains low, especially in rural areas. This fact was mentioned often during the interviews. However, an equally popular topic was the ability of information to flow between social media and other types of media, broadening the effective reach of the technology.

One oft-mentioned path for this information flow was traditional media. For instance, in Liberia, where radio is the chief broadcast medium:

“Kings FM used Facebook a lot because they were having issues that were being discussed, then they were reading from the Facebook page because people were sending in their comments. And they would say ‘Now we go to our Facebook page and read the text from there.’ Same thing with Truth FM.”

Liberia P11, Traditional Media Professional

Meanwhile in Nigeria, a participant who managed the official INEC Twitter account described a kind of benign plagiarism on the part of a major newspaper which copied her Tweets directly without attribution.

Another participant joked about the prevailing order of information flow:



Figure 2: A roadside “ataye” shop in Monrovia where men gather to drink tea and hold discussions. This particular ataye shop focuses on political issues.

“There is a joke on Twitter that what we discuss on Twitter today is headline news in the papers tomorrow.”

Nigeria P14, SMTC Member

Aside from traditional media, participants spoke about how information flows through person-to-person interactions as well. One participant discussed how some topics originating in the LMC Facebook group made their way into Monrovia’s street-side ataye shops (one is pictured in Figure 2), famous for their lively discussion and strong tea:

“Sometimes at the various ataye centers there were issues being discussed that people actually took from social media . . . Everybody [at the shop] wanted to bring an issue that other people didn’t know about.”

Liberia P11, Traditional Media Professional

Interestingly, one Nigerian civil society organization made it their goal to act as a bridge between less-connected citizens (those with mobile phones but no Internet access) and social media. As a result of extensive preparations, this organization was able to leverage its network of so-called “grassroots citizens” to expand the reach of social media:

“We would get reports of hijacking of ballot boxes on Twitter . . . Because we had in our records people who were in those communities, either we’d send a message or we’d call them and say ‘Hey, what is happening,’ and they’d then verify the information.”

Nigeria P11, Prominent Social Media Contributor

This organization’s attentiveness to social media and its desire to bridge “grassroots” Nigerians to social media discourse highlight the perceived importance of social media during the election. Another Nigerian participant captured this well in providing an overview of information flows:

“. . . you’ve got celebrities, musicians, you’ve got people who run radio stations, who have radio shows, who’ve got TV stations, run TV shows, and people have all these different platforms so they can reach so many people. And they come together on social media. So social media is like a common denominator for all of these diverse, different channels. And therefore it creates a single touch point for getting the message across to all of these different people . . . ”

Nigeria P3, Prominent Social Media Contributor

It therefore seems that in Nigeria, social media is becoming a kind of lingua franca for the media world. In Liberia, social media has not achieved the same level of centrality, though there are signs that this may soon happen. Therefore, while issues of access are important and deserving of attention, they do not imply that social media constitute a confined space of little consequence to society at large, as this is obviously not the case.

5.3.3 Cross-Media Triangulation

Another persistent criticism of social monitoring efforts concerns the reliability of the information gathered, and the potential for abuse of the system stemming from contributor anonymity or pseudonymity. Participants confirmed these fears in some instances, such as the inflammatory remarks appearing in the LMC Facebook group, and instances where false results had been tweeted in Nigeria. However, participants also discussed ways in

which the social monitoring system had acted to verify information.

In several cases, this verification was orchestrated through civil society coordination of the sort discussed above. For instance, one participant described his organization's use of a "roving observer" to check on reports from social media:

"If you're getting information from a particular place and you're not too comfortable with that information, you can place a call across to our roving observer to double check whether what they are posting from that side of the country is right or wrong."

Nigeria P2, Prominent Social Media Contributor

This quote also brings to mind the comments above from another participant who reached out to a large network of "grassroots citizens" to verify information from social media reports. Interestingly, that same participant also described exchanges in the other direction:

"We ensured the reports we got from SMS, we put on Twitter and Facebook, and got people there to verify that information."

Nigeria P11, Prominent Social Media Contributor

The SMTC was also called on to consult social media to verify reports from other sources. An SMTC participant described one incident:

"When there was a rumor that there was a bomb scare in say zone six for instance, we got a lot of calls from different news agencies, like 'Have you heard about it?'"

Nigeria P3, Prominent Social Media Contributor

It turned out that SMTC had already seen similar reports, and debunked them.

One Liberian participant also mentioned citizens looking to Facebook as a source of verification:

"Facebook actually helped people to understand exactly some of those rumours you heard out there. Getting from credible people like us through Facebook, they find out, 'Yes, I think this is the actual story.'"

Liberia P7, Prominent Social Media Contributor

Therefore, the "unreliable" criticism perhaps also suffers from the assumption that social media exists as a closed system. The reality seems to more closely resemble an multifaceted ecosystem of information in which social media plays a key role, not only as a source of raw information that requires verification, but also as a site for verification of information obtained elsewhere.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated, from several angles, the use of social media during the 2011 elections in Nigeria and Liberia. In doing so, it has made several contributions.

First, it has portrayed the pre-existing condition of scarcity that has characterized the media sector in both nations. While this fact does not detract from (and in fact renders all the more impressive) the vibrancy and importance of the existing traditional media landscape, it means that the information flow around events like elections may be found wanting, as several of our informants indicated. This gap sets the stage for the gainful adoption of social media.

Second, this study has reviewed three ways in which a new networked public sphere supported by social media has helped to overcome traditional media scarcity: by enabling a new culture watchdogging; by creating a perception of increased transparency in the process; by helping to defuse tensions around credibility of election results.

Finally, this paper has identified signs of robustness of the social monitoring system that should provide nuance to ongoing debates about social media's place in the public sphere. These encouraging signs were: coordination of social media discourse by civil society groups; reach-extending mobility of information across multiple media, both digital and traditional; and vetting and verification of information by citizens, also by reference to other forms of media.

An obvious limitation of this work concerns its generalizability to the population at large. In the interest of deeply examining an emerging phenomenon, this qualitative study has largely targeted insiders, elites, and early adopters in the social media and democratic civil society spaces. It is very likely that the average Nigerian or Liberian knows little to nothing about Facebook or Twitter. This makes general statements about social media's impact on West African elections difficult to justify.

What can be surmised from these results is that there are clear mechanisms by which social media has the potential to build public trust in the process, given sufficient reach and adoption. It may be too early to witness these effects on a large scale, beyond the urban, connected youths upon which this study focused. On the other hand it may not be too early. For one, social media is enjoying rapid growth, arguably reaching the mainstream in Nigeria when the now-President announced his candidacy on the platform. Furthermore, it may be that social media, despite its limited adoption, can boast a disproportionate impact on opinion leaders in the two nations, thus magnifying its influence. In any case, looking into this in a quantitative fashion is a tantalizing prospect for future work.

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