SOCIAL MEDIA AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN THE 2011 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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ABSRTACT
One of the critical features of democracies is elections. Elections are considered important in democracies because they give the people opportunities to vote to power those who will adequately represent their interests. However, to guarantee effective citizen participation in elections, they (citizens) need avenues through which their feelings can be aired. They need strong institutions that will not just speak for them, but that will also allow them to speak for themselves. The social media (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc) mobile phones and online newspapers provided the platform that empowered ordinary Nigerians to express their thoughts, frustrations, opinions and demands to the key contenders for political power in the 2011 Presidential election. This study shows that each of the four key presidential aspirants had a Facebook fan page where they engaged members of the public on important election issues. It examines Nigerians assessment of the social media, particularly, Facebook as channels through which they engaged in political debates and influenced voting decisions. Findings showed that Facebook was used to a great extent by the aspirants in mobilising the support of the electorate. It was also found that Facebook was used as a platform for aspirants to convince the electorate. Results also demonstrated that Facebook promoted citizen engagement in the election by serving as a platform for exchange of views and opinions. It also served as a channel of varying information and as a platform for monitoring the election – from campaigns to the activities of the electoral tribunal and the court. The general conclusion therefore was that Facebook contributed immensely to the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria. This study is important because it opens up new vistas of knowledge on the influence of the social media on electoral politics in Nigeria.
Keywords: Social media, Citizen Engagement, Democracy, Election, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION
New communication technologies have changed patterns of human interactions and relationships globally. From commerce to banking; transport to politics; economics to governance, new forms of structures and relationships have been occasioned by new media technologies. There is no gainsaying that technology has always altered the course of human history. Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press (mechanical moveable type printing) around 1450 played a key role in the development of Renaissance, Reformation, the age of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, and laid the material basis for the modern knowledge-based economy and the spread of learning to the masses (Wikipedia, 2012). In other words, Guttenberg's invention dramatically shaped the nature and character of learning, knowledge acquisition, civilisation, human relations, as well as the dynamics of society.

Closely following Guttenberg's printing press was the invention of the radio. The quest to send and receive information over space at a faster speed than wired telegraph prompted this invention when in 1895, Guglielmo Marconi, an Italian performed the first experiment in wireless telegraphy in which he successfully transmitted wireless signals over a hill, a distance of approximately 2.4 kilometres in 1895 (Wikipedia, 2012). Thus, Marconi's invention has been reported to be the first attempt at providing reliable communication with ships both at sea and across the Atlantic (Wikipedia, 2012). Like the Guttenberg's press, Marconi's wireless telegraphy invention initiated a revolution in radio transmission, a medium which today is considered the most pervasive.

Success in radio communication ushered the invention of yet another technological tool: the television. Television was born out of the desire to transmit integrated audio and visual signals. This idea reached a watershed in 1928, when John Baird, a Scottish engineer invented the World's first practical, publicly demonstrated television system, and also the World's first fully electronic colour television tube (Wikipedia, 2012). Television has been globally acclaimed as the greatest influence of the 20th Century. According to exampleessays.com (2012, p. 1):

> There is probably no greater influence on social issues and society itself than the television. It has become arguably the greatest invention of the past century. With it, we have witnessed countless historical events: Inaugurations of presidents; man's first steps on the moon; the assassination of John F. Kennedy; even disasters as they happen. Americans watch TV in the morning to receive the daily news. They eat watching it. They watch it before they go to bed.

In other words, the invention of television radically transformed the society by redefining the culture, expectations, life styles, and to a large extent the behaviour of the people. Television has become the hub of human activity; it has become so central to modern life that its utility cannot be overemphasised. People watch weather forecast on television to be able to decide the kinds of clothes they would wear for the day; they learn about eating habits and health disorders on television, they learn about the economy, commerce, government policies, politics and development, etc on television. In fact, television remains an indispensible technological tool in modern societies.

Technological developments in the 21st Century have yet become more complex. For instance, the Century brought in its wake, the convergence of what is now referred to as the *traditional media* (print, radio, television) on the internet. There is also a transition from linear to digital technology, a development which has transformed the communication technology landscape to the point that we are witnessing the emergence of new internet based media forms. Examples here will include intranet technology, new media technologies and social media among others. New developments in media technology now make it possible for an entire library to be housed on the internet. Typical to the new forms of media technology, particularly the social media is the characteristic of interactivity. Interactivity within the context of new media technologies entails participatory culture. It infers enlarging the public sphere for the deconstruction of social discourse. In this regard, the social media can be used to challenge repressive government policies, corruption, electoral fraud, police brutality; other forms of discrimination, injustice and social inequalities. They can also be used in providing information, analyses on topical issues, foray for debate, and in mass mobilisation for worthy social causes.

Recent uprisings in the Middle East, *Arab Spring* as it is popularly called present three paradigms of social media driven revolution: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and now Syria which serve as ready frames of reference for our discourse. Social networks like the Facebook and Twitter were used as *tools* to mobilise the people against the autocratic and oppressive governments of these countries. The

result was the termination of these age old governments. In other words, via their characteristic of interactivity, social networks served as catalysts in orchestrating the *Arab Spring* by quickening the communication process. They ensured speedy dissemination of critical information on the prevailing state of social factors, social discontent, and other factors. This information empowered the youth, who studies show are active users of the social media for the purpose of keeping abreast of happenings in their environment; interactivity, and social engagement among others. This information as a result precipitated social movements which gathered momentum, and reached a crescendo with the toppling of the anti-people regimes. However, it should be noted that more information ordinarily does not always make things better; a lot depend on the content and the attitude of the audience to the media content. The dominant thought therefore is that the social media were critical factors in those revolutions but not the revolutions. Put another way, social factors and other factors mediated the usage of social media in mobilising the social movements that peaked in the revolution in these countries.

There is arguably a strong connection between the social media and social movements as the Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria paradigms have shown. However, the social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, MySpace, Youtube, etc) were not established, neither intended to be handy tools in the hands of protesters. Rather, they were primarily established to facilitate social networks among individuals. In other words, social media were established with the primary objective of facilitating social relationships between people on the one hand, and building connecting chains of friendships and on-line acquaintances (on-line community) on the other hand. Social media, therefore offer individuals opportunities to articulate their social networks and to establish connections with significant others (Wikipedia, 2012).

Contemporary happenings have however demonstrated that far beyond the imagination and expectations of the founders of Facebook (Zuckerberg, Saverin, Moskovitz & Hughes) society has extended, amplified and even multiplied the functions of social media. Evidence shows for example that, Facebook has been used for mobilising people for worthy social causes: elections, protests, development, etc. Examples that readily come to mind are those of the Arab Spring referred to earlier in this discourse, and the US elections of 2008, in which President Barak Obama exponentially used the Facebook in mobilising support.

With the foregoing background in perspective, this discourse therefore examines the extent to which Facebook was engaged by the aspirants in mobilising support on the one hand, and the electorate in airing their opinions, thoughts and demands on the other hand, and in monitoring the conduct of the 2011 Presidential Election. In doing this, we shall be guided by the assumption that technology alone cannot bring about changes, but how it is used. The question therefore is and remains: to what extent was the Facebook engaged by the aspirants in mobilising support and the electorate in airing their opinions, thoughts, and demands, as well as in monitoring the conduct of the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The general objective of this study is to assess the extent to which Facebook was engaged by the aspirants in mobilising support and the electorate in airing their opinions, thoughts, and demands, as well as in monitoring the conduct of the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Specifically however, the study was designed to:

1. Determine the extent to which Facebook was engaged by the aspirants in mobilising support in the Election.

2. Assess how aspirants used Facebook in influencing voting decisions in the Election.

3. Establish how Facebook fared as an alternative medium of expression in the conduct of the Election.

4. Find out how Facebook fared as a tool for citizen engagement in the Election.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Arising from the objectives are corresponding sets of research questions:

1. To what extent was the Facebook engaged by the aspirants in mobilising support in the Election?

2. How did the aspirants use Facebook in influencing voting decisions in the Election?

3. How did Facebook fare as an alternative medium of expression in the conduct of the Election?

4. How did Facebook fare as a tool for citizen engagement in the Election?

DISCOURSE ON CONCEPTS
Concept of Social Media

Social media anchor on the concept of Web 2.0 internet applications. According to Kaplan and Haenlein social media refers to "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" (cited in Wikipedia, 2012, p. 1). The Web 2.0 concept in internet applications made a debut in 2004. It represents a paradigm shift in Web applications as it heralded the era of the emergence of interactive Websites. Prior to 2004, internet applications operated the Web 1.0 paradigm in which sites were non-interactive, and users were passive atomised recipients' or users of internet information. Websites that are 2.0 compliant are those that are interactive in nature and provide for the user to co- create and exchange content on the Web. The emphasis is on interactivity, which was lacking in previous web applications.

According to Wikipedia (2012, p.1), "social media includes web-based and mobile technologies used to turn communication into interactive dialogue." A perceptive reader would quickly note two defining properties of the social media in this definition: technologies and interactive dialogue. Literarily this would imply that social media are internet based technologies that make interactive dialogue happen. *The Social Media guide (2012)* presents 50 definitions of social media; a look at some of these definitions will furnish us a better perspective to attempt our definition of the social media. Accordingly, social media have been defined as:

✓ Content created and shared by individuals on the web using freely available websites that allow users to create and post their own images, video and text information and then share that with either the entire internet or just a select group of friends.
✓ A category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking, and bookmarking online.
✓ On-line media platforms that provide content for users and also allows users to participate in the creation or development of the content in some way.

- ✓ The sharing of user (human) created information and interacting on-line using Internet technology.
- ✓ The democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers. It is the shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to-many, to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversations between authors, people, and peers.
- ✓ The various forms of user generated content and the collection of websites and applications that enables people to interact and share information online.
- ✓ The use of technology combined with social interaction to create or co-create value.
- ✓ People having conversations online. These conversations can take a variety of forms; for example, blogs and comments on photo sharing.
- ✓ A group of internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content. This content is then shared through social interaction.
- ✓ Content created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies. At its most basic sense, social media is a shift in how people discover, read and share news, information and content.
- ✓ Online venues, such as social networking sites, blogs and wikis that enable people to store and share information called content, such as text, pictures, video and links.
- ✓ A variety of Web-based platforms, applications and technologies that enable people to socially interact with one another online.
- ✓ User generated content that is shared over the internet via technologies that promote engagement, sharing and collaboration.

A close look at the foregoing definitions reveals the following common denominators:

1. Social media are internet based technologies, web applications, and online platforms
2. They connect people via social interactions and conversations online
3. They facilitate the creation and exchange of user generated content
4. They use such forms as blogs, comments, text, photos, video and links in promoting conversation online

Using these common characteristics, we have defined the social media in our discourse as a variety of web-based platforms, applications and technologies that facilitate virtual interactions via the creation and exchange of user generated content online.

Social media technologies take on many different forms including magazines, Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, microblogging, wikis, podcasts, photographs or pictures, video, rating and social bookmarking (Wikipedia, 2012). Kaplan and Haenlein (2012) classify the social media into six types: 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), and Virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life). Technologies include: blogs, picture sharing, vlogs, wall postings, email, instant messaging, music sharing, crowdsourcing and voice over IP (Wikipedia, 2012).

Concept of Citizen Engagement

As a concept, citizen engagement has been defined differently by different authorities. However, striking similarities run through these definitions. According to the Department of Information Technology, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, India (2011, p. 5) "citizen engagement is an interactive two way process that encourages participation, exchange of ideas and flow of conversation. It reflects willingness on the part of government to share information and make citizens a partner in decision making." To Bassler, Braiser, Fogle, and Taverno (2008, p. 3) "citizens of a community are engaged when they play an effective role in decision-making. That means they are actively involved in defining the issues, identifying solutions, and developing priorities for action and resources." CIHR (2012, p. 1) sees citizen engagement as the "meaningful involvement of individual citizens in policy or program development . . . citizens are engaged when they play an active role in defining issues, considering solutions, and identifying resources or priorities for action." Sheedy, MacKinnon, Pitre, and Watling (2008, p. 4) on the other say ". . . citizen engagement values the right of citizens to have an informed say in the decisions that affect their lives . . . citizen engagement emphasizes the sharing of power, information, and a mutual respect between government and citizens."

A close look at the definitions of citizen engagement will reveal that it is:

1. An interactive two way process between government and individuals, which encourages participation, exchange of ideas, and flow of conversation.
2. A process that encourages mutual decision making between government and individuals.
3. A mechanism for power sharing between government and citizens with the government disseminating the relevant information needed to make the citizen partners in decision making, while the citizen on the other hand have informed say in the decisions that affect their lives.
4. A process where the citizen are actively involved in defining the issues, identifying solutions, and developing priorities for action and resources.

Using these characteristics as indices, we have defined citizen engagement within the ambits of our study as the process which encouraged mutual interaction between presidential aspirants and Nigerians in which the presidential aspirants disseminated relevant information to empower Nigerians for effective voting decisions, while Nigerians on the other hand were actively involved in defining the issues which the aspirants will address, then helping them in identifying solutions, as well as developing priorities for their action and resource allocation.

According to Sheedy et al (2008), citizen engagement extends beyond an informed, active and engaged citizenry. Engaging citizens in a policy or programme development, they argue, can:

- Increase citizen's sense of responsibility and understanding for complex issues;
- Be an important mechanism to clarify citizen's values, needs and preferences allowing public servants and politicians to understand how the public views an issue and what is most important to them, what information the public needs to understand an issue and how to best frame or speak about an issue;

- Lead decision – makers to make better decisions by helping them to understand the potential social and ethical implications of their decisions amongst populations that they may not be familiar with;
- Allow politicians to share ownership for a controversial public decision with citizens; and
- Increase the legitimacy of public decisions.

Even though the context of our study is slightly different from that which Sheedy et al (2008) have written about, the reasons they have advanced for citizen engagement in policy making and programme development fit excellently into our discourse. This is because they address the key issues interactions between contestants' and voters will raise in any election. Again, they have provided standards with which to assess the responsibilities and expectations of both the contestants and the voters in electoral politics. Therefore we shall be using some of these indices later in the study as benchmark for evaluating the quality of citizen engagement the social media delivered to Nigerian electorate in the 2011 Presidential Election.

Concept of Election
Election entails the process of selecting via due procedure, a few people from a group of competitors, in which the selected people exercise authority in decision making on behalf of the significant others. It is a sort of delegated responsibility in which the person elected into power is socially responsible and accountable to the electorate (i.e. those who voted him/her into power). Accountability entails that he/she carries the people along via the process of due consultation, while maintaining high standards of transparency and probity. According to Wikipedia (2011, p. 1), "an election is a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office." A close look at this definition reveals four vital characteristics: (i) Election is all about decision making (ii) Elections is processual in nature; it is not a haphazard activity, but a methodical process (iii) Election has to do with the selection of one or a group of persons who will represent the interest of a significant others (iv) Election confers legitimate authority on an individual or group of individuals to exercise authority over significant others. In the light of the foregoing, election has been conceived in our discourse as the process of selecting representatives who will hold power in trust and conscientiously wield it for a defined group of people.

NIGERIAN JOURNALISM AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT
Nigeria is a democratic republic and the principles of Freedom, Equality, and Justice have been enshrined in the Constitution for the purpose of consolidating the Unity of the people. Chapter One of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria enumerates the principles upon which Nigeria's democracy is built. Chapter Two of the Constitution titled: *Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy* provides in S.14 (1) and (2) that:

(1) The Federal Republic of Nigeria shall be a State based on the principles of democracy and social justice
(2) It is hereby, accordingly, declared that-
(a) sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom government through this Constitution derive all its powers and authority;
(b) The security and welfare of the people shall be the primary purpose of government; and
(c) The participation by the people in their government shall be ensured in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution.

The notion that sovereignty belongs to the people, and the provisions that guarantee popular participation, security and welfare of the people brings to mind Lincoln's idea of democracy: Government of the people, by the people, and for the people. In essence, Nigeria's democracy like other democracies of the world makes room for the people to elect their government. The government on the other hand, in return for the confidence of having it voted into power, pilots the affairs of the state responsibly and is accountable to the people. "One way of ensuring responsibility and accountability is by actively engaging with the public while making policies that impact them directly" (Department of Information Technology, Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, India (2011, p. 3).

One sure way of keeping faith with the onerous task of social responsibility, accountability and citizen engagement is the utilisation of mass media channels in the process of establishing dialogue, consultation, and information sharing. In other words, the mass media constitute the mechanism and structural institutions which society has evolved to check the excesses of the government and make it socially responsible and accountable to the people, and much in the same way, the people to the government. The ombudsman role of the mass media has been acknowledged by 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Chapter Two, S.22 provides that:

The press, radio, television and other agencies of the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the
fundamental objectives contained in this Chapter and uphold the responsibility and accountability of the
Government to the people.

Even though this provision clearly articulates the social responsibility of the media to hold the government accountable to the people, it also implies that the media equally have the mandate of holding the people accountable to the government. This means, in other words, that the media are strategic forces in regulating government-citizens relations by playing the umpire role. In performing this role, they offer opportunities to the people to speak out against unpopular and repressive government policies, programmes and actions, while the government on the other hand engage the media to educate the people on its policies and to mobilise support for its programmes.

However, observation and research have shown that the mass media do not exist for the common good. According to Udoakah (1992, p. 100) "the mass media do not exist for a 'common good' but as promotional fora for their proprietors and dossiers of shortcomings for their owners' political and economic or social rivals." Further, he argues that:

What determines news…are the goals of the different mass media organizations. Which is to say
that the mass media select and publish only those things they hope would win their audience to a
point of view beneficial to their proprietors.

This infers that rather than give room for public opinion to shape the process of governance, the media create bottlenecks that lead to the narrowing of the public sphere, which in turn precipitate conditions which ultimately muzzle and muffle the voices of the people. The tendency of the media to stifle public opinion has grown in leaps and bounds especially with the advent of commercialisation. According to Oso (2011), the advent of commercialisation in Nigeria's journalism has led to a situation where economic pressures have become greater, while editorial operations are progressively being restricted both in terms of quality, and range of output. The sad thing about this situation is

the painful truth that it is the poor, the powerless, those who lack the resources to establish their own medium, those who do not have the cultural capital and competencies required to attract media attention to their own terms, that are at the receiving end (Oso, 2011). In essence, Oso's argument is that the media have:

> . . .not been able to provide an all inclusive national space to give full expression to all segments and social classes in the country . . . the interests of the subaltern classes have been marginalized in the public sphere which has been dominated by the interests of the elite class constituted along ethnic and regional lines (p. 13).

These contradictions have therefore influenced and transformed the patterns of media access and utilisation, particularly among the subaltern classes who are increasingly being marginalised in the public sphere. This is where the alternative media of communication, particularly the social media have become relevant. It has been reported that the social media are "relatively inexpensive and accessible to enable anyone (even private individuals) to publish or access information, compared to industrial media (mass media), which generally require significant resources to publish information" (Wikipedia, 2012, p. 2). This probably explains why the social media are very popular among the youth and the marginalised poor. Again, the dynamics of Information management in the 21st Century have eliminated the bottlenecks of stiff regulation and control of media content. The social media, in the light of the foregoing are therefore not easily amenable to the control of the government against which they are reporting. In this regard, they cannot be easily censored, so they have been used to break barriers of government regulation, to give critical information, and to generate awareness and mobilise the people for worthy social causes. This has been the experience of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and now Syria.

ENGAGING SOCIAL MEDIA IN ELECTIONS

The social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter have assumed yet another dimension of use in the 21st Century society – the task of political mobilisation and promotion of democracy around the world. The role of Facebook in The American Presidential Election of November 2008 readily comes to mind as a global reference point. According to Mascaro and Goggins (2010, p.1.):

> The 2008 US Presidential election illustrated that mobilization on social networking sites (SNS) can influence the public's participation in political discourse. Information is distributed to organization leadership and membership simultaneously, and response and discourse emerge almost immediately. This ability to receive information from campaigns and discuss it among other geographically disparate supporters changes the nature of citizen participation in the political process . . .

Going further, they argued that (P.3):

> All three of the major candidates in the 2008 US Presidential Primary and General Election, Barack Obama, John McCain and Hillary Clinton, depended on social media for mobilization and fundraising. Immediately following the November 2008 election victory, Barack Obama's Facebook page had over 3 million supporters. He also had five million supporters on 15 other social networking sites, including Black Planet, a social network focused on the African American Community (Vargas 2008). At that time Obama was also number 1 in Twitter followers with over 100,000 (twitter.com). In addition to the use of social networking websites, Obama's campaign sent 1 billion messages to a list of 13 million supporters that had been amassed from campaign rallies and other online activity (Borins 2009). Obama placed the Internet at the center of his campaign's information, communication and coordination infrastructure. In the 2008 election, at least 46 percent of Americans used the Internet to get a significant amount of election news during the primary season (Smith and Rainie 2008). Further, 40% of Internet users with profiles on social networking sites used the website to receive or partake in political activity and more specifically half of those under 30 used their social networking accounts for political activity. Most of the political activity included attempting to mobilize support and sharing or seeking out information from individuals on the site (Smith and Rainie 2008). Obama's election is often attributed to his community organizing experience, but his campaign's skillful use of social media enabled him to build up grassroots support more rapidly than what was witnessed in previous campaigns (McGirt 2009).

Strecker (2011, p.4) pushes the argument further with the position that:

> The 2008 election served as a catalyst for public engagement on Facebook. Many candidates employed the speed and breadth of Facebook communications on behalf of their campaigns. In the election's wake, analysts partially attributed large Democratic victories to youth promoting candidates through Facebook and other social media platforms (Kiyohara, 2009). However, Facebook's average user is now 40 years old, and middle-age users dominate as Facebook's fastest growing demographic (Facebook, n.d.). Visits to the site account for one out of every four American webpage views, and late in 2010, Facebook surpassed Google as the most-visited site on the Internet (Grossman, 2010).

All these go show a direct correlation between technology and the political process. In other words, as technology changes, it influences corresponding changes on political campaigns. In fact, utilising the best practices, technologies and strategies will deepen democracy and ensure representation and citizen engagement in the information age (Clift, 2004). According to Wikipedia (2012), Facebook fanbases of political candidates have relevance for election campaigns, including:

> ➢ Allowing politicians and campaign organizers to understand the interests and demographics of their facebook fanbases, as with Wisdom for Facebook, to better target their voters.
> ➢ Providing a means for voters to keep up-to-date on candidates' activities, such as connecting to the candidates' Facebook Fan Pages.

This was the case with social media utilisation, particularly Facebook in the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND 2011 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

Statistics indicate that there are 800 million active Facebook users globally. It has also been held that Facebook is the most visited website on the Internet with 11 per cent of the world population having Facebook accounts. There are also indications that Facebook reaches 55 percent of the world's global audience accounting for roughly 75 per cent of the time spent on social networking sites and one in every seven minutes spent online globally (The Social Skinny, 2012). According to techloy.com (2012), Facebook users in Nigeria have crossed the 4 million mark, having experienced a growth rate of 4.89 percent or 953, 060 in the last 6 months, which made it the 15th fastest growing country on Facebook globally, and the 35th country in the world ranking of countries on Facebook. With a Facebook population of 4,076,160 as at October, 2011, Nigeria is reported to occupy the third spot in Africa after Egypt and South Africa, currently at the first and second spots in Africa with 8, 929, 740 and 4,567,640 users respectively (The Social Skinny, 2012). Similarly, Nigeria is reportedly the third Twitter nation in Africa after South Africa and Kenya, with 1.67 million tweets, while South Africa reportedly generated over 5 million tweets, and Kenya 2.48 million tweets (nairaland.com, 2012). With this heavy social media presence, it is not surprising therefore, that Facebook was extensively engaged by Nigerians who actively participated in the political process and the 2011 Presidential Election in particular. This paper therefore assesses the influence of Facebook on citizen engagement in the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria.

METHOD

A descriptive method – Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was used in this study. This research technique was used because of its "flexibility in question design and follow up" as well as its "ability to clear up confusing responses from respondents" (Wimmer & Dominick, 1997, p. 97).

A total of 30 focus group discussions of ten respondents per group were conducted with politically active youth who were card carrying members and executives of the four political parties whose political candidates were most visible in the 2011 Presidential Election – Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Nigerians' Peoples Party (ANPP), and Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN). These discussions were held in six purposefully selected states, one state from each geo-political region of Nigeria. These states were selected on the grounds of political consciousness and activism. Accordingly, FGD's were held in the capital cities of Kano State (North West), Lagos State (South West), Benue State (North Central), Akwa Ibom State (South South), Anambra State (South East), and Borno State (North East). Each of these states had a total of 5 focus groups and 50 respondents (10 respondents per group) drawn from the four key contending parties (PDP, CPC, ANPP, & ACN). The respondents who were both male and female were in the age bracket of 20-40. Research assistants were used in conducting FGD's in four states: Kano, Lagos, Anambra, and Borno, while the researchers focused on Benue and Akwa Ibom state respectively. In all, a total of 300 respondents were sampled, with each state accounting for 50 respondents.

RESULTS

Responses from the Focus Group Discussions (FGD's) were collated, analysed and presented using the explanation building technique of data analysis. Findings were as presented in the discussion segment of this paper.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of findings anchors on the objectives outlined in the introduction.

Extent of Facebook Utilisation in Mobilising for Support for 2011 Presidential Aspirants

Respondents agreed that Facebook was used to a great extent by the Presidential aspirants in mobilising the support of the electorate. The consensus was that Facebook provided the platform as well as excellent opportunities for the aspirants who all had Facebook fan pages to interface with the electorate mostly through random comments and enquiries. It was also found that for people who had earlier supported the candidature of Goodluck Jonathan (PDP), it provided an excellent opportunity for the extension of this support. Responses also indicated that Facebook provided a basis for the marketing of the candidacy of other Presidential aspirants such as General Muhammadu Buhari (CPC), and Mallam Nuhu Ribadu (ACN).It was however clearly observed from the FGDs that apart from Goodluck Jonathan who had an elaborate social media presence, the other candidates did not have this presence and relied on social media members who had prior support to solicit voter sympathy. Generally, findings indicate that although Facebook was used to a large extent to mobilise the support of the electorate in the 2011 Presidential Election, its degree of usage did not match that of the traditional mass media (Newspapers, magazines, Radio, Television, etc), group communication, and face-to-face communication. Even though Goodluck Jonathan (PDP) and Muhammadu Buhari (CPC) led in the use of Facebook and eventually came first and second in the election, doubts were raised by respondents whether there was effective mobilisation towards participation, their reasoned opinion in this regard was that Facebook alone cannot claim the credit. This finding infers that there is need to ascertain through further research, the extent of effectiveness of Facebook in the 2011 Presidential polls. What was perhaps obvious was the fact that Facebook appeals mostly to the youth in terms of age groupings; and the fairly well to do since access to it depends on access to the internet. We can therefore conclude from the foregoing that compared to the traditional media of communication, group communications, and face-to-face communication, Facebook was a limited tool in the hands of the aspirants for mobilisation of support, since the mobilisation function was limited to only the people who had internet access (connectivity) or who had smart phones with Facebook applications.

Aspirants use of Facebook in Influencing Voting Decisions

Varying responses were elicited on this issue from the FGDs. Some respondents felt that the influence of the Facebook on the voting decisions of the electorate may not be independently ascertained because the medium was only one of the many media the electorate were exposed to. Others reasoned that there were other variables that inform the choice of a candidate. So, it was not enough to conclude that interactions on Facebook influenced voting decisions – negatively or positively. It was also the considered opinion of significant others that Facebook provided a platform for the aspirants to *convince* the electorate why they had to contest the election. This group of respondents buttressed their argument with Goodluck Jonathan's (PDP) case, arguing that his candidacy was highly controversial; as such he needed to clear the doubts of the electorate as to why he was in the race. Respondents were also of the view that Facebook provided the opportunity for answers to be given on certain issues even if these answers were not so convincing. It was also gathered that Facebook served essentially as a platform for exchange of views and opinions; some of these opinions, respondents argued, were made prior to the advent of the election, while others were actually made during the election. Specifically, some respondents said aspirants used Facebook in influencing voting decisions by: selling their manifestoes, countering the manifestoes of rivals, educating Facebook friends on voting procedure, and in disparaging rivals. By and large, we may conclude that by providing opportunities for the aspirants and electorate to

interact online, Facebook created the enabling platform for the aspirants to influence the electorate via persuasion (presenting manifestoes with the intent of convincing, convicting, and moving the electorate to action – actual voting).

Facebook as an Alternative Medium of Expression
Responses showed that Facebook served a great deal as a medium of alternative expression. For instance, majority of the respondents argued that many electorates who were denied access to the traditional media of mass communication found expression in Facebook and other social media. They said comments that could never have featured in the traditional media were featured on Facebook. For example, some comments on Facebook referred to Buhari (CPC's) aspirant as a Muslim candidate with the intention to Islamise Nigeria, this wouldn't have been the case in the traditional media. Similarly, it was gathered that Jonathan (PDP's) aspirant was presented on Facebook as a weak leader who lacked courage, and was not in control of the affairs of the nation. Again he was presented as Obasanjo's stooge, and was also accused of killing the erstwhile President – Yar Adua so as to succeed him. All these would have been impossible in the traditional mass media. Evidence from the FGD's also showed that there was a tendency to become very emotional in propagating support especially on the side of the supporters of opponents to Jonathan (PDP) who was contesting as an incumbent President. One key drawback of the Facebook serving as an alternative medium of expression to which attention was drawn in the FGDs, which also applies to other social media is the practice of peddling speculations, unfounded allegations and propaganda. In this regard it was observed that many people used Facebook to run down other candidates. It was also observed that most of the time, conflicting and self-serving information which bred misinformation to the less discerning was published on Facebook during the period of the election. In fact, a few debates actually turned ugly as responses showed, these in turn, precipitated situations of abuse and insults. There were also situations where threats were actually made to some electorates, the sad fact however is that Facebook provides essential data on persons with accounts, this made the situation insecure and endangered the lives of those concerned.

Facebook and Citizen Engagement in the 2011 Presidential Election
It was a general consensus among respondents that Facebook contributed immensely to the 2011 Presidential Election. For instance, it was held that, for the first time in the electoral history of Nigeria, the Internet was extensively used for debates, campaigns and the general mobilisation of the electorate especially during the Presidential Election. Respondents iterated that on the positive side, Facebook was a channel of information, providing the electorate with varying information that not only mobilised them for the polls, but also informed their choices of candidates. Through Facebook, many Nigerians were abreast of changes in the electoral timetable; many had direct contact with aspirants through interactions on Facebook pages and Twitter handles. In essence, Facebook and indeed the social media provided channels for aspirants to reach the electorates. It was gathered that Jonathan (PDP) had a special Facebook fanpage through which he used to answer several questions about his candidacy and quite a lot of Nigerians especially those with Facebook accounts actually followed most of these debates with keen interest, even though not all of them supported his political aspirations. This finding corroborates CP-Africa report that Jonathan had over 500,470 fans out of about 3 million home based Nigerians on Facebook. This fan base is reported as being quite phenomenal and astonishing as it is second only to that of United States' President Barak Obama among world presidents on Facebook. Obama is reported to have 18.5 million fans, while President Nicholas Sarkozy of France is reported third with about 403,000 fans (CP-Africa, 2011). In other words, Facebook furnished a veritable tool for citizen engagement in the 2011 Presidential Election. Through it many electorates followed the Election – from campaigns through the election to the activities of the election tribunal and the court.

Reference was also made to a post by Essien Ndueso on Facebook January 14-15, 2011, intended to disseminate information on the progress of the PDP primaries in which the incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan locked horns with a former Vice President – Atiku Abubakar. The information which was deployed via his Blackberry and posted on his Facebook page reported these results, with a rider that said: So far, after 14 states Jonathan has 954 while Atiku has 18; anyone still in doubt?

State*		Jonathan**		Atiku***
Abia		80		1
Adamawa	76		31	
Akwa Ibom		141		0
Anambra	47		8	
Bayelsa		67		0
Bauchi		46		44
Rivers		128		2
Sokoto		32		84
Taraba		62		15
Yobe		29		20
Zamfara		7		70
FCT		24		3
Lagos		52		3
Jigawa		100		17
Nasarawa		53		8
Osun		99		1
Benue		72		15

Source: Essien Ndueso, Facebook, January 14-15, 2011
*Key:*States of the Federation. **Scores by incumbent Jonathan. *** Scores by Atiku Abubakar*

CONCLUSION
This study was conducted to assess the extent to which Facebook fared as a tool for citizen engagement in the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria. The study was guided by four objectives. Findings showed that Facebook was used to a great extent by the aspirants in mobilising the support of the electorate. It was however found that mobilisation by Facebook was limited to the people who had internet access or smart phones with internet applications. In this regard, it was concluded that the degree of Facebook usage in the election did not match that of the traditional mass media, group communication and face-to-face communication.

It was also found that Facebook was used as a platform for aspirants to convince the electorate. Through Facebook the aspirants attempted to influence voting decisions by selling their manifestoes and countering the manifestoes of their rivals.

Findings also showed that electorates who had no access to the traditional media of mass communication found expression in Facebook and other social media. Results also demonstrated that Facebook promoted citizen engagement in the election by serving as a platform for exchange of views and opinions. It also served as a channel of varying information and as a platform for monitoring the election – from campaigns to the activities of the electoral tribunal and the court. We may therefore conclude on a general note that Facebook contributed immensely to the 2011 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Its use in the Election represents a paradigm shift in electoral politics in Nigeria as it marks the first time in the electoral history of Nigeria, that the Internet was extensively used for debates, campaigns and the general mobilisation of the electorate.

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