
TOWARDS DIGITIZATION OF ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

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Abstract

Nigeria in the past two decades has taken great leaps in adoption of technology in handling most activities of national life. In education, online registration and computer based-testing are fast supplanting manual registration and paper testing just as banking, telecommunications and other service sectors that strive for efficiency are largely computerized. However, a key aspect of our democratic life – voting appears to be stuck in the dark ages with paper voting with its attendant encumbrances. It is even disheartening that even though, many nations of the world have since the 1960s been using electronic voting with qualified successes, the most recent Electoral Act as amended took special attention to block e-voting just as the novel use of card readers to ascertain voter cards' authenticity met stiff opposition from some quarters. This paper argues that just as the use of card readers in the 2015 general elections enormously reduced rigging, greater embrace of digital applications in future elections is a can't do without requirement to ease our electoral processes and shore up the desired credibility we yearn for. The paper recommends a concerted campaign by the mass media in Nigeria to advocate for far reaching reforms of electoral processes in the country, chief of which should be e-voting and counting.

Keywords: Digitization, e-voting, democracy, media

advocacy

Introduction

Throughout history, humans have been on a continuous quest to bring improvements to daily living and execution of societal tasks. This has yielded monumental changes in all fields of human endeavour as manifest in improved transportation systems, healthcare systems, housing, agriculture, manufacturing and many other sectoral divides.

At the core of societal transformation are advancements in technology. From the invention of simple tools to today's complex array of interconnected electromagnetic devices, society has been transformed in ways we have not known before. The developments have transported our society into a new era variously tagged as the digital age, computer age, and new media age or information age. The era is characterized by technology which considerably increases the breath and speed of knowledge within society. Its socio-economic transformation is on a scale similar or more than that of the industrial revolution (Shepherd, 2004).

One key by-product of the digital era as expressed by Davidson and Goldberg (2010) is that:

...more and more choices are available to the public, in everything from consumer products to software, social networks, modes of play, knowledge

and data repositories, and cultural archives. Learning, too, has a 'long tail' where more and more is available virtually, to potentially much wider, more distributed, and diverse ranges of people (p.52).

Related to the above, the payoffs of digital applications are visible in banking sector operations where digitisation has 'overnight' transformed the sector to an extent that banking transactions from account opening to cash withdrawals can be done virtually on one's computer or mobile phone. Apart from round the clock transaction at Automated Teller Machines (ATMs), an account holder can withdraw money anywhere in the world once she possesses a valid card.

The political sphere is not immune from these influences of the digital era. According to Bishop (2004) digital technology and the internet have greatly affected the political realm in recent years. His focus however is on citizens' input and interaction in government processes which he says "the mainstream media no longer hold all the power in political commentary. This is the same thinking advanced by DeutscheWelle at its 2015 Global Media Forum thus:

Tweets by US President Barack Obama reach his 60 million followers instantly. With his large following, the American president clearly ranks first among tweeting world leaders. The internet and social media have become

tools for politics and diplomacy. More than 170 heads of state and government maintain personal twitter accounts. At the same time, the governed increasingly have made their voice heard in global politics as well via social media, blogs and micro blogs and by sharing information, pictures and videos. The digital revolution has not only reached politics but is changing it.

While many could claim compliance to the digital era with dandy catch terms as e-governance, e-campaigns and the like, there appears to be a lukewarm attitude towards digitizing elections. Curtis (2015), commenting specifically of the United Kingdom context submits that: “From doing your weekly shopping and booking a taxi to paying your bills and filling your tax return, most of the important transactions in your life can now be carried out online. **But one crucial process is still stuck in the dark ages: voting**” (Emphasis mine).

The Nigerian situation is similar. Even though the digital age and its accompanying transformations have been embraced by the generality of Nigerians, the move by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to introduce electronic voting via the amendment of the 2010 Electoral Act was overwhelmingly turned down by legislators at the national assembly as channels television reports: “Nigeria's lawmakers in the senate have rejected a proposal to empower the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) to adopt

electronic voting for the 2015 General elections”. Further energies were directed at scuttling the use of card readers which opponents claimed were aspects of electronic voting. With the voting process restricted to paper balloting, it has remained unfeasible for Nigerians who stay abroad or who are away from the country during the election period to vote even in this age.

In all these, the media played or failed to play active roles for the success of the electoral processes. What contribution did the media in Nigeria make in this regard? How much coverage did the media provide about these issues to give the Nigerian electorate a clearer understanding of the nuances involved? How did/does the media frame these issues?

Theoretical Orientation.

Agenda setting theorizing acknowledges that the media set agenda at multiple levels. According to McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar and Rey (1997), the first level agenda setting is conversed with transmission of object salience while the second level agenda setting is centered on transmission of attribute salience. Agenda setting is believed to have been coined by Cohen in 1963. In his submission, Cohen (1963, p13) said the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is strongly successful in telling readers what to think about”.

Discussion on agenda setting, whether on the first level or the second level of framing issues always inclines to the perceived ability of the mass media to make issues assume some salience in the minds of the people to an extent that the issues are known as the most typical or important.

Wanta, Golan and Lee (1997, p2) capture this thinking thus:

Agenda setting then is a type of social learning individuals learn about the selective importance of issues in society through the amount of coverage the issues receive in news media. Thus, the more coverage an issue receives, the more concern individuals have with the issue. In other words, individuals learn how concerned they should be through the amount of coverage the issue receives.

Studies by McCombs and Shaw (1972 & 1993) as well as Mcquail (1993& 2005) all show that agenda setting role of the media manifests more preponderantly during election campaigns. As concurred by Ciboh (2010), media coverage indicates to the public what the main issues of the day are and this is reflected in what the public perceives as the main issue (p.128).

The second level agenda setting which has been vigorously explained by scholars as Entman (1993) and McCombs (2004) look at the power of a communicating text. McCombs (2004) describes framing of news as “the central organizing idea for news context that supplies a context and

suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration” (p.87).

Framing as a higher level of agenda setting implies therefore that the mass media are capable and do select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text in ways that promote particular problem definitions and/or treatment recommendations for items described (Entman 1993, p52).

By adopting the agenda setting/framing theorizing to provide the theoretical basis for this study, the study agrees with McCombs and Shaw (1972) that the “pledges, promises, and rhetoric encapsulated in news stories, columns, and editorials constitute much of the information upon which a voting decision has to be made” (p1). It follows therefore that mass media reports on enhanced digitization of electoral processes in Nigeria hold enormous potentials of influencing the process, placing the issue on the front burner, galvanizing public acceptance and instilling confidence in the system. This is only consistent with the idea behind agenda setting that elements prominent in the mass media picture become prominent also in the audience picture.

State of Electronic Voting

Enhanced adoption of electronic software in elections has always met stiff opposition even in developed countries of the world. The Netherlands which had been one of the earliest

nations to adopt e-voting were forced to reverse to paper balloting due to well-orchestrated campaigns by pressure groups about the vulnerability of voting machines which the opponents tagged as voting computers.

In the United States of America where e-voting is largely in use, Massey (2004) had submitted that those opposed to the use of direct recording electronic voting machines argue that it “introduces potential for abuses, fraud, mistake, discrimination and error” (p74). The argument about the vulnerability of the voting system grew so intense that Michael Shamos, a professor of Computer Science who has been a staunch supporter of e-voting, offered a \$10,000 cash reward to anyone who can undetectably tamper with his DRE system. Till date, there has been no challenge (Clowers, 2008). But the opposition has not abated.

Much of the opposition to electronic voting in the west surrounds the issue of risks with computer systems. As Alvarez and Hall (2008) cited Sustein (2005), much of the world is at the moment interested in precautionary risk management. As the principle goes, the decision to mitigate a potential risk requires the existence of absolute proof that it will come to fruition. In areas of health for example:

The precautionary principle mandates that when there is a risk of significant health or environmental damage to others or future generations, and when there is significant uncertainty as to the nature of

that damage or the likelihood of risk, then decisions should be made so as to prevent such activities from being conducted unless and until scientific evidence shows the damage will not occur. (Sunstein (2005) citing President of Friends of the Earth).

This argument reflects the views of the People's Democratic Party's opposition of the use of card readers over fears that the novel technology was likely to malfunction; and the refusal by Nigerian senators to approve electronic voting during the 2015 elections due to the uncertainty of the system's workability. But as Sunstein (2005) contends, apart from the difficulty in meeting the very high standards of the precautionary principle, the risks posed by the status quo are not taken into consideration. Moreover, if the principle is taken as standard behaviour, then nothing will really be done because nothing human lends itself to certainty. In such a situation, launching of satellites into space and new vaccines will not be invented due to the fact that the risks involved are not know. This is applicable to use of digital applications in elections where fear of the unknown consigns us to living with the paper ballots that are inherently cumbersome, time wasting and prone to manipulation.

Some of these anticipated fears about electronic voting are enumerated by Shamos (2004, pp.35-36) to cover:

1. Electronic voting machines are black boxes whose workings are opaque to the public and whose feedback to the

voter is generated by the black boxes themselves. Therefore, whether or not they are operating properly cannot be independently verified.

2. No amount of code auditing can ever detect malicious or even innocently erroneous software. (Relatedly), no feasible test plan can ever exercise every possible combination of inputs to the machines or exercise every one of its logic paths.

3. Hackers have proved adept at hacking numerous websites, illustrating the vulnerability of electronic media.

4. Companies that make electronic voting machines may be run by individuals with partisan political interests, and those individuals may order that their voting machines be programmed to record and count votes in a way that reflects their bias.

5. There have been many failures involving electronic voting machines in elections that resulted in permanently lost votes and possibly changed election outcomes illustrating the fragility of their voting technology.

The criticism about electronic voting applications and vulnerability to hackers is very genuine and even manifested on the day of the Presidential and National Assembly elections when hackers invaded INEC website. But in spite of this vulnerability, use of digital systems in very critical sectors of has not ceased. The trend has been that of continuous evolvment of firewalls to hedge hackers off. The issue of

black boxes however amounts to mere splitting of hairs because black box experiences abound even with manual systems. It is impossible to follow an individual ballot from casting to counting with certainty even with manual paper voting. But the grand answer to all the fears is the potential of systems to continuously evolve to an extent that leaks are plugged over time.

Benefits of e-voting

Much as there has been a cautious embrace of electronic voting across the globe, many countries are increasingly adopting digital processes in elections. In Europe there have been experimentations with e-voting in Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Great Britain and Switzerland (Musial-Karg, 2014). Curtis (2015) even went further to prophesy that the 2015 general elections in Britain may well be the last paper-based balloting.

Elsewhere, Panama introduced electronic voting in 1992, Brazil in 1996 and Australia in 1998. Costa Rica joined the train in 2002, Argentina in 2003 while India, the largest democracy in the world introduced electronic voting in 2004. African countries as Ghana and Kenya embraced more digital applications in their recent general elections than Nigeria did. E-voting is not exactly a new technology. The earliest e-voting system is believed to have been invented in 1964 (Tokaji,

2005). Many countries have indeed been using one form of e-voting or the other since the 1960s. According to Jacobs and Pieters (2006):

The Netherlands were quick to introduce electronic voting. In 1965 a legal provision was put in place to allow the use of machines, including electronic ones in voting. In the late 1980s, attempts were made to automate the counting and the first electronic voting machine appeared.

Overtime, several electronic voting devices have been evolved. These include punched cards, optical scan systems and Direct Recording Electronic (DRE) voting machines to the most contemporary transmission of votes on the internet or telephones. E-voting systems are basically of two types - polling place and remote. Polling place e-voting describes systems where voters cast votes inside via electronic platforms at a polling station or designated premises under the control of an electoral staff. On the other hand, remote e-voting presupposes systems where voters cast votes anywhere and usually via internet transmission.

Well planned electronic voting will allow for greater access and participation. In places where the system has worked before, it has made it possible for “some disabled people to vote independently, where they otherwise could not have “(Virginia Fields, Voting Technology for People with

Disabilities (2003). A very convenient feature of workable voting devices is that they also provide an audio voice option that can accommodate both blind and illiterate voter, allowing for greater independence and dignity in voting (Tokaji, 2005, p.17-24). Paper-based voting is by nature time consuming and error-prone. It is also very expensive. In Nigeria, experiences have shown the long waiting time for arrival of voting materials and officials, the never ending processes of accreditation and vote casting often under unpleasant climatic conditions. The manual vote counting is also sometimes disrupted and repeated severally with attendant human errors. Effective e-voting infrastructure is capable of easing the election process, making it more convenient as well as cost-effective. This could address the recurring issue of poor voter turnout as was witnessed during the gubernatorial and House of Assembly elections across the states of Nigeria. Much as the number that did not vote could be attributed to various reasons, having a system that could reduce waiting time and provide more conveniences could sure be more attractive to electorates.

A major benefit derivable from increased digitization of elections, proponents argue, is opportunity for elimination of irregularities that manual systems are largely prone to. Electoral irregularities that are preponderant in Nigerian are captured by Mato (2009, p.14) to cover:

- Compilation of false names in voter's registers.

- Illegal compilation of separate voter's cards.
- Illegal possession of ballot boxes.
- Stuffing of ballot boxes
- Falsification of election results.
- Illegal thumb-printing of ballot papers.
- Underage voting.
- Illegal printing of forms used for collation and declaration of election results.
- Deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas.
- Announcing of results in places where no elections held.
- Unauthorized announcement of election results.
- Harassment of candidates, agents and voters.
- Change of lists of electoral officials.
- Box-switching and inflation of figures.

Some of these electoral malpractices have been of alarming scales that Yaqub (2008) once said the “2007 general elections belong in the genre of undemocratic elections. Indeed, the elections of April, 2007 were, or did not satisfy the minimum conditions of democracy”.

With digital registration databases that link voters to their biometric data, some of these irregularities are bound to be curtailed. For instance non-existent “Mandelas” and “Barack Obamas” that used to riddle our manual registers have become history with card readers. Adoption of automated voting

systems can also pick up under-aged voters as their biometrics will reveal their eligibility.

Enhanced digitization of voting is bound to be **faster and likely to produce more accurate election results**. Automated systems are alleged to be more accurate than manual counting and computations which are sometimes criticized for error. Although the initial cost of setting up electronic voting infrastructure may be intensive, on the longer run it will become less expensive compared to paper voting that will always be increasing due to increase in voters.

From the Indian experience Kumar and Walia (2011) add that electronic voting and counting systems eliminate the possibility of invalid and doubtful votes which in many cases are the root causes of controversies and elections petitions. The trio of Goodman, Pammett and De-Bardeleben (2010) presents a similar angle that electronic voting has the potential to improve the quality of ballots cast by reducing or eliminating ballot errors and by creating better informed voters. There may be **no ballot errors**, and, depending on the system, **no spoiled ballots** because the computer will not permit it.

In an era of environmental consciousness, e-voting will reduce to a great extent the tonnes of paper used to print ballots thereby saving a large number of trees. This promotes environmental friendliness.

What the Media can do

In all elections all over the world, for the exercise to be deemed to be not just free and fair but credible, certain conditions are expected to be present. Jacobs and Pieters(2007) list requirement as transparency, verifiability, fairness, eligibility to vote free/equal suffrage and accessibility. The media can play invaluable roles to ensure compliance with their requirements.

The media's role in ensuring transparency of an e-voting system is crucial. As Clowers(2006, p.16) citing Tokaji submits:

The concept of transparency in voting relates to the system's ability to produce traceable records and detect what is happening within a voting system so as to instil confidence in the system both from voters and from candidates. Transparency literally gives us a window through which we can observe the internal workings of the mechanism so that we may understand more accurately how results are realised.

The media in this wise as the purveyors of information need to be alive to their responsibility of keeping tabs on electoral processes and providing clear pictures to the electorate. The issue of the card readers is a case in point. The Independent Electoral Commission had not made hidden their plans to use card readers to ascertain card holders' authenticity. When opposition for their use mounted, the

media too appeared to be caught unawares. Even after the largely successful testing of card readers, *Vanguard* chose to lead with the dismissive headline “INEC mock poll exposes card readers' flaws”, with the rider - Our worries – PDP.

Electoral reforms do not just descend from space. They are devised and advocated for. In Nigeria, the bulk of reforms recommended by the Justice Uwais Committee have not been implemented. Adoption of electronic voting also needs to be validated in the Electoral Act before it will become operational. The media occupies a prime position to advocate for amendment of the electoral laws to accommodate e-voting.

Taken the clamour for internet and remote voting in other climes now, opponents of electronic voting may be quick to state facts that Nigeria is not ripe to adopt the trend due to absence of support infrastructure. They may be right on the score that the country may not afford remote voting where the electorates vote at any location. But polling station electronic voting is still possible because countries as the Philippines, Brazil and India that are using e-voting with resounding successes also grapple with similar situations in Nigeria as illiteracy, uneven electronic infrastructure base and hard-to-access rural populations. Again, with continuous innovations as *Project Loon* described by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as one of the technological breakthroughs of 2015, within two years, it will be possible

for “billions of people [to] get online for the first time thanks to the helium balloons that Google will soon send over many places cell towers don't reach”. Possibilities as these can be drummed up by the media to garner support for increased digitization of the electoral process.

Another concern that may many people express about electronic voting is the loss of secrecy by voters that may not be conversant with voting technologies and may thus require assistance. Critics argue that since many Nigerians, especially those in rural areas are illiterate; their choices may be influenced or out rightly manipulated by those that assist them. While this concern seems genuine, it needs to be understood that there is in a real sense nothing so sacred with secrecy in voting. For instance, the Netherlands, as Jacobs and Pieters (2007) submit, has legislation on voting by proxy: “Since 1928, the option of '*Stemmen by volmacht*' (voting by proxy) exists: one can authorize other people to cast one's vote. It is meant to be used in case of illness or absence”. While electorates have autonomy over their choices of candidates at polls and they have the liberty to keep those choices close to their chests, experience has shown that in Nigeria as elsewhere in the world, citizens openly declare their preferences for candidates even when many are not partisan politicians. This perhaps explains why the open ballot system of the botched third republic general elections was celebrated as one of Nigerian's fairest elections. When related

to other sectors that require secrecy, it is a common sight to see banking customers on ATM queues freely give their ATM cards with the access pin codes to those they trust to transact on their behalf. This is even in spite of repeated warnings by banks that customer should avoid revealing their ATM personal identification numbers to avoid fraud.

The media can be in the vanguard of disabusing the anti-reform antics of those who insist on the status quo and use the media to peddle their feeble justifications.

Conclusion

The core of this paper's argument for enhanced adoption of digitization of elections and electoral processes in Nigeria in spite of concerted and often genuine concerns about the vulnerability of electronic systems is rooted in the apt statement by Castro (2007) that:

Americans trust computers to run critical applications in fields such as banking, medicine, and aviation but a growing technophobic movement believes that no computer can be trusted for electronic voting. Members of this movement claim that in order to have secure elections, Americans must revert to paper ballots. Such claims are not only incorrect but attack the very foundation of our digital society which is based on the knowledge that information can be reasonably secured. Clearly, no system with a human element – including

electronic and non-electronic voting machines – is error proof. Neither of these facts, however, should be taken as a universal indictment of e-voting.

The process of improving our electoral system to make it attain desirable standards is a continuous one. For many Nigerians and the international community, the 2015 general elections recorded marked improvements when compared to previous ones. As averred by *The Economist* magazine of June, 20 2015:

*Much of the credit goes to AttahiruJega, a soft spoken academic who was put in charge of the Independent Electoral Commission... he has spent the past five years cleaning up voter's roll and **introducing the electronic ID verification that makes it much difficult to stuff ballot boxes.** (My emphasis).*

Many other shades of opinion agree that the card reader was the real game changer of the 2015 elections signposting that enhanced deployment of tested technologies may significantly raise standards of our elections. This thus justifies the call on Nigerian legislators by the outgoing Chairman of INEC, Professor AttahiruJega that “between now and 2019, there is sufficient time and scope for us to be able to ensure that additional reform methods can come in”.

Mass media in Nigeria need to be at the forefront of this drive. The media have always been valuable advocates in any reform process that is introduced and in validation of the

framing theory, the media can frame debate about electronic voting and how Nigerians can perceive it. This starts with media professionals understanding the debate very well themselves – that no system is infallible, but that in the light of the present digital revolution, the electoral process needs a reform.

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