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SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN AFRICA: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Introduction

Politics has evolved in recent times with the advent of new technologies. The coming of social media in particular in the last few years has brought a new vista not only in the area of political communication but information sharing in general. The *Facebook*, which is the most popular, allows campaigners to send out mass messages, post pictures and videos and interact with the public. *Twitter* is used to send short and targeted messages to thousands of followers and to interact with others. *YouTube* is used to post campaign videos; and *Flickr*, to post campaign pictures, among others.

Today, the advent of these technologies tends to make everyone who can use them a mass communicator. One can stay right in his bedroom, sitting room or even in a moving vehicle and access information, entertainment, events and enjoy full interaction with the world just by pressing a button. Writing on this development, Adibe and Odoemelam (2011, p. 12) observe that the new media of communication have in no small measure helped

communities to be aware of one another. Baran (1998, p. 63) agrees that:

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

The above statement is relevant to our discourse as it draws attention to what social media are doing in the area of human communication, especially as it concerns the fostering of relationships and interactions among people. In many parts of the world today, individuals, groups, organisations and even nations are taking advantage of the opportunities provided by social media and other e-media platforms to mobilise millions of people to support and advance their cause. In the political sphere, it has become a veritable tool for mobilising citizens towards active participation in the political process and democratic projects.

Before the advent of the new media, the older or conventional media – radio, television, newspapers, magazines, etc, ruled the world, and had directly or indirectly blocked popular participation in the electoral process. This is because there has always been scarcity of space and airtime given by the conventional media to the citizens to have their say in politics, governance and in the electoral process. Conventional media critics such as Graber (1976), Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) and Fallows (1996), all cited in Abubakar (2011) believe that voters were left with paid political propaganda containing only meaningless slogans, making them disinterested and cynical about politics. They argue that there is absence of serious debate in the conventional media that could make people to learn the substance of issues and policy proposals as well as related arguments, and that this disallows citizens from participating actively in political discourse.

The coming of social media in the last few years has however brought tremendous changes in citizens' involvement in the political process. This is because the technology is open, participatory, interactive and cost-effective. They belong to the new genre of media that focus on social networking, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information, as well as publish their own views on the Internet (Adibe, 2013).

The ubiquitous access of these online devices has democratising effects as they offer citizens opportunities for fuller engagement in the political process. This means that voters have become more than just passive consumers of digital messages; they are now creators of the messages. Writing on this development, Kuhus (2011) in his paper "Life in the age of self-assembling message" cited in Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe (2012, p. 11) observes that:

The value of the communication experience has undergone a sea-change; from the need to share it, to the need to share in it. Technology and social media in particular have brought power back to the people; with it, established authorities are now undermined and users are now the experts.

This implies that people can now consume media as wanted and needed rather than allowing media producers to schedule consumption time and content. A person can now communicate to anyone from any place at any time. Again, using social media is less expensive than the outrageous political advertisements on the older media. The new media are flexible, accessible and affordable. They promote democratisation of media, alter the meaning of geographic distance, and allow for increase in the volume and speed of communication. They are portable due to the mobile nature; they are interactive and open to all.

However, the coming of the social media is not without its

peculiar challenges. For one, the social media explosion may be leading to the erosion of African values. The high rate of illiteracy among the people is still a major challenge. Lack of basic infrastructure such as stable power still threatens the use of the new technology. The endemic poverty, systemic corruption and political instability in many African countries still inhibit the growth of the social media technology on the continent. Poor telecommunication networks/Internet usage in most parts of Africa is also a serious setback. The low and uneven penetration and access to the technology especially in sub-Saharan Africa is still a serious issue. Writing on this development, Osuala in Adibe and Odoemelum (2011, p.21) writes that:

the diffusion of new technologies in Africa is still at a snail speed such that the gap between the information rich developed countries and African countries continue to increase everyday..... Africa has 13% of world population but only 2% of the world telephone lines and 1% Internet connectivity. Consequently, most African countries have not been able to reap the abundant benefits of the global information revolution in many areas of life.

Again, in many parts of Africa where the social media are in use, they are still mainly an urban affair and use is mostly elitist. Inability to monitor and regulate the technology is also a serious threat. For Nigeria, Africa and indeed developing nations to benefit maximally from the social media in the political process, the identified issues must be confronted with all seriousness in view of the peculiarities of Africa, as well as the overall development of the continent in general and Nigeria in particular.

The Problem

The last few years have witnessed a consistent growth in the use of the social media for political purposes in Africa. The platform has indeed become a formidable force for social engineering and political electioneering. This is so because the technology is participatory, interactive and cost-effective, and this has made it the medium of the moment as far as political communication, mobilisation and participation are concerned. However, the circumstances surrounding the use of the social media technology for political purposes in Africa today raise some critical questions and some issues of serious general concern. For one, there is a possible metamorphosis of the 'Arab Spring' into an 'Africa Spring' orchestrated by widespread use of uncensored, unfettered and unregulated social media-based tools.

Again, the increasing use of the social media especially among young people is creating 'moral panic' in the society. It is also a problem that the uneven penetration of the technology is creating a dichotomy in information diffusion, resulting in a digital divide between the "information haves" or "digital highway users" who have access and can afford to acquire and use such technologies, and the "information have-nots", who do not have access and may not afford and operate the computer or pay the bill for Internet service connection and subscription. The anonymity of sources (which makes the technology less credible, low computer literacy among the African users, endemic poverty, systemic corruption, epileptic power supply, all impede social media use in Africa.

Theoretical Base

This discourse is anchored on the uses and gratifications theory. The theory is associated with the works of Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Micheal Gurevitch (1974). It belongs to the limited or indirect effects theories of mass communication. The theory according to Anaeto, Onabanjo and Osifeso (2008, p. 71) is concerned with what people do with the media instead of what the media do to people.

The assumption is that people influence the effects media have on them. It assumes that members of the audience are not passive but play active role in interpreting and integrating media into their own lives. The theory suggests that people use media to fulfil specific gratifications. Folarin (1998) notes that the main thrust of the theory is that audience members have certain needs that make them expose to, attend to, and retain media messages because of the perceived gratifications derivable from such messages. Thus, this theory emphasizes the fact that people are important in the process of communication because they choose content, make meaning and act on that meaning (Akinwumi, 2011).

Applying the uses and gratifications theory to this discourse, users of the social media are intentional seekers of such messages. They are able to select and use the technology in ways that suit their purpose. Thus, as the audience, they are active and not passive. Similarly, political candidates are also able to select and use media of choice and message content of their choice during electoral campaigns.

Method of Analysis

The discourse is theoretically based. It is approached from the descriptive and analytical perspectives. Descriptive studies as the name implies aim at describing or explaining a given phenomenon. Yang (2010) notes that the difference between descriptive and analytic approaches is that while descriptive studies attempt to describe, determine or identify what is, analytical studies try to establish why it is that way or how it came to be. This is in agreement with the submission of Wimmer and Dominick (2006) that while descriptive research compares and describes what phenomena are, analytical research usually concerns itself with cause-effect relationships, and the result usually allows researchers to examine the interrelationship among variables and to develop explanatory inferences. This method is adopted to analyse and address the many questions that have arisen following the emergence of the social media especially as concern their use in the political process and the

possible effects it could have on the fragile and fledgling democracies in Africa and Nigeria in particular.

Conceptual Clarifications

For a better understanding of our discussion, it becomes imperative at this juncture that we define the two key concepts of this study - social media and political participation.

Social media: When we talk of social media, we mean those Internet-based tools and services that allow users to engage with each other, generate content, distribute, and search for information online. In other words, the social media are interactive web-based media platforms that offer citizens opportunity and place to connect, share opinions, experiences, views, contacts, knowledge, expertise, as well as other things such as job and career tips. They belong to a new genre of media that focuses on social networking allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends and share information with greater freedom as well as publish their views on issues on the World Wide Web. Chatora (2012) observes that it is the interactive or collaborative nature of these tools that make them social.

Mayfield (2008, p. 12) describes these media as, “online media that promote participation, openness, conversation and connectedness”. Nation (2010, p. 12) sees them as, “social instruments of communication which are different from the conventional instruments like newspapers or magazines. They are online content, created by people using highly accessible and a scalable publishing technologies to disseminate information across geographical boundaries, providing interaction among people. It supports democratisation of knowledge and information, thereby making the people both information producers and consumers.

Social media emerged with the advent of the Internet and the World Wide Web. They are usually associated with the term “Web 2.0” which is used to describe websites that provide opportunity for a user to interact with the sender of a message. Nwabueze (2012, p. 3) notes that “Web 2.0” refers to the state of the web from 2004 till date; a period when interactive websites emerged as opposed to

“Web 1.0” which describes the state of the web prior to 2004. Web-based communities, social networking sites, video-sharing sites, Wikis, and blogs, are among examples of Web 2.0 sites (Allen, 2011, p. 22).

Political Participation

Political participation is citizens' involvement in the acts, events or activities that influence the selection of and/or the actions taken by political representatives. It refers to the various mechanisms through which members of the public express their political views and, and/or exercise their influence on the political process (Chatora, 2012). Abubakar (2011) sees it as the involvement of people, (not necessarily active) in any political process before a collective decision is arrived. In other words, political participation entails citizens' engagement in the discourse of socio-political and economic issues, which serve as yardsticks for choosing would-be leaders. It may also include assessing the capabilities of the incumbents and advocating ways of ameliorating societal ills for a more prosperous country.

Political participation includes such activities as political discourse, political campaigns, voter registration, the actual voting, writing and signing of petitions, attending of civil protests, joining interest groups that engage in lobbying, political advocacy, monitoring and reporting of cases of violation of the electoral process such as frauds, rigging, intimidation, violence, monetary inducements, underage voting, etc.

Before the advent of the new media, political campaigns and other participatory activities blossomed in the traditional media. Olajide (2002) cited in Onwukwe (2011) notes that prior to this period, political rallies, personal contacts and speeches were popularly used for mobilising electorates' support on political issues, and that this was greatly propelled by the force of the mass media. At that time, political participation was more risky, expensive and required a great deal of investments from individuals willing to engage in political activities. The process was quite taxing as far as time, money, knowledge and information were concerned. The

endemic poverty in Africa prevented citizens from attending political meetings, and sometimes, from travelling to exercise their voting rights. According to Chatora (2011), a World Bank report in 2005 had it that 50.9% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa lives on less than \$1.25 a day. Chatora argues that such financial constraint is capable of preventing citizens from engaging in political activities especially those that require financial investment. Within this context where poverty is extensive, time also becomes an important factor that determines whether citizens would devote time to personal activities that guarantee their immediate survival or to political participation that does not promise an immediate and tangible material outcome for them. With this problem, coupled with that of insecurity and fear of possible outbreak of violence, citizens' active participation in the political process was/is heavily compromised.

Good enough, the coming of the social media in the last few years is fast changing the situation as we now have online platforms that serve as a new “political capital” where people resort to and participate in political discourse (Abubakar, 2011:447). Citing Kweon and Kim (2011), Abubakar maintains that social media have become a main source of personal orientation, anonymous interactivities and social community on a variety of issues that involve politics and political discourse. Mayfield (2010) and Bradley (2009) attribute the social media capacity of boosting participation to its connectedness and textual/audio-visual appeal. For sure, the *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *YouTube*, *the 2go*, GSM-SMS/calls, blackberries services, etc, have made political participation much easier, faster and even more cost effective than ever before.

Using Social Media for Political Participation in Africa: Selected Cases

According to Hamilton (2011), President Barack Obama was the first to penetrate the social media especially *Facebook* for his electoral campaign in 2008 in a way never equaled by anyone, for any purpose in human history. Since then, various political actors

across Africa and beyond have continued to embrace the social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, YouTube and blogs for campaigns and other political activities.

In Nigeria, the case of President Goodluck Jonathan quickly comes to mind. Jonathan had on Wednesday, September 15, 2010 announced his bid for the highest political office in the land on *Facebook*. He informed his 217,000 fans on the world's most popular networking platform of his intent. Twenty-four hours later, 4,000 more fans joined his page. By the day of the election, on 16 April 2011, he had over half a million followers (Odoemelam and Adibe, 2011, p. 12). In addition to the approximately three million registered Nigerians on *Facebook* and 60,000 on *Twitter*, almost every institution involved in Nigeria's elections conducted an aggressive social networking outreach, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, candidates, media houses, civil society groups and even the Police.

Organisations such as “Enough is Enough Nigeria”, “ReclaimNaija”, “WangoNet” and “IamLagos” established platforms enabling citizens to report election-related incidences with pictures, videos, text messages and voicemail. At the same time, traditional media houses such as Channels Television, *234Next* and *Punch* newspapers used new media to disseminate information and gather feedback from viewers.

Odoemelam and Adibe (2011) further observe that during the elections in Nigeria, many Nigerians were armed with their blackberries and *Twitter* feeds. One of such Nigerians was Gbenga, a 33 year old IT consultant and an activist, his team had designed a smart-phone application called *Revoda* which allowed voters to instantly upload photos, pictures and reports of delayed arrival of voting materials and presence of intimidating gangs at their local polling stations to their database; a daily summary was then sent to Nigerian election officials and Western observers as well as being posted on the *Revoda* website, *Twitter* and *Facebook* pages. This allowed many people within and outside Nigeria to follow the process.

There was another group, “Reclaim Naija” which used text messages and e-mail reports to compile a live online map of trouble spots. There were also “*Twitter* activists” whose job was to look out for rigging and spread warning about bombings at polling stations. Omenugha (2011:5) observes that this massive use of social media contributed immensely to the success of the election acclaimed the freest and fairest in the history of the country.

Meanwhile, this disagrees with the observations of Adeyaju and Harana (2011) that the technology did the nation greater harm than good as it provided avenue to disseminate dysfunctional messages that culminated in the post-election violence and tensions witnessed in many parts of the country, particularly in the north.

In Zambia's 2011 elections, various civil society and interest groups employed the social media to monitor incidents related to the presidential elections held in September. Chatora (2011) observes that *Bantu Watch* was a civil society-driven website that utilised *Facebook* and *Twitter* to encourage registered voters and interested parties to report incidents involving election-related violence, hate speeches, corruption and other matters online via the website and via text messages. According to him, Tweets with the hash-tag '*Zambiaelections*' were automatically compiled and linked to the *Bantu Watch* website. This initiative, which allowed citizens to participate in monitoring the electoral process, marked an unprecedented step in utilising social media to entrench citizen engagement with the electoral system.

Perhaps what would remain for a long time in the history of social media use for political struggle in Africa was during the Arab Spring in North Africa. In Tunisia where the popular protests began, the agitations were largely mediated through the use of *Twitter*, *Facebook* and blogs. Citizens demonstrated against government corruption, inequality, censorship and joblessness (even among the well-educated youths). The new arsenal of social networking helped accelerate Tunisia's revolution, driving the country's ruler for 23 years, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, into ignominious exile and igniting a conflagration that has spread across

the Arab world at breathtaking speed (Adibe, Odoemelam and Chibuwe, 2012).

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

On February 10, amidst unrelenting protests, Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that Mubarak had ceded power. On May 23, 2012, Egyptians had their historic election that saw the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood - Mohammed Morsi an elected replacement for Hosni Mubarak just one year after his departure.

In Libya, the situation was not quite different from the Egypt experience though Muammar Gaddafi's government made all efforts to maintain strong control of the Internet infrastructure. However, the social media role later became more visible in the escalation of the protests as activist groups used the social network, especially *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* to call for protest meetings and to inspire revolution/call for Gaddafi's resignation. These examples go to show that social media have become a virile instrument in the political and electioneering process in Africa.

The Issues and Major Challenges

The chapter notes that the introduction of social media in the political process in Africa is indeed a great blessing. However, experience in the use of the technology for political purpose on the continent in the last few years raises some key issues to worry about.

From 'Arab Spring' to 'an Africa Spring'?

The worry here is that the new found type of political activism and participation, propelled by the social media force has the propensity of spreading the protests that ravaged North Africa to other African countries in no distant time. The popular protests dubbed the 'Arab Spring' began in December 2010 with a college-educated street vendor's (Mohamed Bouazizi) self-immolation in Tunisia's coastal town of Sidi Bouzid in despair at the corruption and joblessness that pervaded the country. The young man died from burns, but online Internet tools to Egypt, Libya and many other Arab nations, rapidly fanned the protests of his death despite Tunisia's strict web censorship laws. Its skirmishes were quickly recorded in Algeria, and narrowly averted in Morocco, Sudan and Mali. Between December 2010 and late 2012, over 22 countries in Africa have witnessed pockets of protests.

Here in Nigeria, it was the January 2012 protests over the removal of fuel subsidy. The protests witnessed a massive use of *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Blackberries*, *2go*, *YouTube*, etc, for public discourse. In Lagos, Kaduna and Kano where the protests took roots and later went violent, citizens used the social media platform to capture and report cases of police brutalities and cases of manhandling of citizens. Cell-phone SMS/calls, *Facebook* and other social media platforms were used to mobilise crowds for protests at the Ojota Gani Fawehenmi Square (a scenario very similar to that of the Tahrir Square in Egypt during the uprising); pictures and videos of the intimidating crowd were then uploaded to *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Twitter* for the world to see and to spur up Nigerians in other cities to follow suit. The *Facebook* pages of President Goodluck Jonathan equally received thousands of messages of condemnation on a daily basis during the few days that the protests lasted, with some calling for his resignation.

In Uganda, citizens also attempted to follow the North African example. The protests were led by Kizza Besigye, the closest rival to President Yoweri Museveni at the February 2011 general elections. With social media platforms and other fora,

Besigye was able to organise protests against what he called “doctored results” of the elections and mobilised supporters for the 'walk-to-work protests in agitation against the soaring fuel and food prices in the country.

In Djibouti, there were violent protests between January and March, 2012. The protests were similar to the revolution in North Africa and the Middle East in many ways. President Omar Guelleh had stayed 11 years in office and approaching the end of his second term, but his move to amend the constitution to guarantee him a third tenure received aggressive resistance and protests with demonstrators demanding his ouster.

The Angolan government has also demonstrated apprehension over the potential of the social media in facilitating the protests. Against the backdrop of the protests in North Africa, some Angolan citizens attempted to follow suit but the police thwarted the planned protests in March 2011. Following the failed protests, the Angolan parliament proceeded to pass a bill tightening control over the flow of information using new technological tools in the country. The law allows the regime to 'intercept or block communications and retain data from servers and any other personal computers without prior authorisation from a court.

Cameroon has also experienced social media jitters following the Arab Spring. At the height of the protests in March 2011, the Cameroonian government ordered the mobile operator MTN to suspend its *Twitter* SMS service. Cameroon provided this *Twitter* SMS service since November 2010, which allows users (through SMS/text messaging or with a third party application) to receive Tweets via SMS from people they follow, and also to post updates to *Twitter* from their phone through the short code 8711. However, following the Arab Spring, the service was suspended, a move heavily criticised by activists as an attempt to prevent citizens from protesting against President Paul Biya's government. We think that the force, fashion and simultaneity with which these protests spread cannot be a total coincidence, but must have been facilitated and fuelled by the North African experience in social media use.

The Moral Panic

One key issue surrounding the use of social media in Africa today is the general heightened moral panic. By this, we mean that in this part of the world, there is an increasing fear that the unfettered and unregulated social media networks and indeed the new communication technologies promote alien and demeaning practices such as gangsterism, pornography, drug addiction, rape, nudity and semi-nudity, etc. This has been an issue of growing concern in the use of the technology in Africa.

Invasion of Territorial Sovereignty

The worry here is that as social media continue to promote linkages, interactions and interdependence, a time would come (if it has not come) when governments may no longer protect their sovereign jurisdiction from the effects of outside authorities and private actors, and Africa may be/is at the receiving end.

Promotion of Violence

The issue of concern here is that the social media technology has been widely used to arrange, support and fuel violent protests in many parts of Africa in the first few years of their existence on the continent. Similar to this challenge is that of the increasing use of the technology to spread hate and inciting messages. Adeyanju and Haruna (2011) write that during the 2011 electioneering period in Nigeria, *Facebook* and GSM-SMS were widely used to disseminate provocative and inciting messages that eventually culminated in the most unfortunate violence that followed the announcement of the election results in some states of the North with some calling on non-indigenes to leave.

The Regulation Issue

The inability to regulate and monitor the social media technology has remained an issue. This agrees with the submissions of Kidafa, Odoemelam and Elechi (2011, p. 12) that “regulating traditional

media in the face of issues like obscenity, copyright, right to privacy, etc, was upheaval, but has become more difficult with the emergence of social media”. This is to say that with the great potentials of the technology comes the challenge of monitoring and regulation if our society must not fall beyond the short, nasty and brutish clime described in George Orwells' animal farm that prompted Ekwe *et al* (2011) to propose for the anarchical theory of the media. The theory according to him foresees a society in chaos owing to disorder in seeking, receiving and disseminating of unfettered information (Kidafa, Odoemelum and Elechi, 2011).

Uneven Penetration

There is a growing disparity in the penetration of the technology in the developed and developing nations. Even within Africa, the rural population is still largely excluded from the social media as the technological backwardness in most African countries has restricted the World Wide Web's accessibility to cities, thereby shutting out the rural areas, which constitute the greater land area and population of the masses (Adibe 2010). Writing on the disparity in the penetration of new technologies and their implications, Ndukwe (2005, p. 23) notes that:

We live in a global village where technologies have direct impact on a nation's ability to compete globally; we must therefore ask ourselves how we have fared in comparison with other nations of the world in providing access to these vital infrastructures for our people..... While countries like Sweden boasts of about 100 percent access, Nigeria's figure is at a level of less than six percent; even within the African continent, we are still far behind countries like Egypt, South Africa, Botswana, etc.... Nigeria

remains a “Lilliputian” in the international development index as far as ICTs penetration and usage is concerned.

1. In addition, lack of basic infrastructure such as stable power still threatens the use of the new technology in Africa as they are massively dependent on power, which in most cases has remained epileptic.
2. Anonymity of sources makes it difficult for strict regulation, monitoring and prosecution of illicit acts. This makes the technology a vulnerable instrument for perpetuating fraudulent acts.
3. The technology promotes piracy. This is partly because the question of copyright and intellectual property is more complex and difficult to define and regulate.
4. Similarly, images, sounds and videos can be digitally manipulated and posted or twitted; so truth and reality are difficult to ascertain on social media.
5. Social media are addictive in nature, making work/life balance hard to achieve.
6. With the new technology, we get more than we bargain because of their information overload and social network overload.

The Prospects

We have identified the numerous challenges and issues associated with social media use in African politics. However, the prospects are enormous. For one, with social media technology, information sharing is now greatly enhanced as everyone can now create his/her own messages. This makes it a virile instrument for political participation as politicians, citizens and governments can reach one another quickly and at low cost. This offers representative and participatory democracy at its best. With it, election results could be released faster and more accurately. In addition, it could help in reducing political rallies, which in most cases result in violent clashes with opponents. It reduces election malpractices as voters

can now mass communicate results of each pooling unit to reduce the possibility of falsifying figures.

A politician can take advantage of this instant form of communication to reach the masses with the aim of assessing the political atmosphere before venturing into the campaign. Social media are perhaps the best tool to assess the popularity of a candidate especially by the young people and craft the best language to use as a campaign slogan. The social media also provide politicians with the opportunity to be informally free with the public, and afford the electorate a friendlier avenue of assessing candidates for political offices and promoting transparency in governance.

It may therefore not be an overstatement that the advent of social media platforms in Africa has brightened the future of democracy on the continent regardless of the identified few challenges.

Concluding Remarks

This discourse has examined '*Social Media and Political Participation in Africa: Issues, Challenges and Prospects*'. It has shown that the use of social media is fast becoming a common phenomenon in African politics, especially on the electoral process. This is evident from both local and general elections in several countries in the continent in the last few years and in the recent political developments in the North, Central and West Africa. As far as the doctrine of free flow of information is, concerned, social media are the right technology. We note that despite the unique features of the technology in the political process on the continent, there are still key issues that require close attention if the said benefits must be enduring. We identify one of such issues as the possible metamorphosis of the 'Arab Spring' into 'Africa Spring' propelled by the increasing force of unregulated social-media-tools. The paper is also worried that the new media are creating 'moral panic' in the society. Issues that border on anonymity of sources, uneven penetration of the technology, absence of clear regulation, illiteracy, endemic poverty and systemic corruption on the continent were also identified.

We recommend massive education and orientation of citizens on how to exercise greater caution in the use of social media platforms in order to minimise the inherent weaknesses and maximise the intrinsic values of the technology in the political process on the continent. It also suggests government intervention in the provision of a more conducive environment to foster penetration of social media and guarantee greater access to the technology.

On the challenge of regulation, we suggest the urgent review of media laws to address the technicalities involved in the newer technologies. To do this, various regulatory bodies should as a matter of urgency begin to think out some policy sub-sections on different types of media such as *Facebook*, blogging and *Twitter*, this we believe would go a long way in making the social media platforms better and safer for political participation in Africa.

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