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# The Role of Social Media in Voter Sensitization in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Social media has become a prominent and a powerful forum for voter enlightenment, political activism and fastest means of information dissemination. An individual without a social media account is seen in the society as obsolete. Social media has indeed become our lives personally and professionally. An average smart phone owner cannot do without visiting a social media platform daily. Social media therefore can be used effectively to target particular voters, encourage people to exercise their franchise and to make information go viral. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube help to activate citizens' engagement in political life. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) saddled with the responsibility of educating voters on their electoral roles and responsibilities unfortunately doesn't have pronounced presence in the social space. This paper analyses the roles of social media in voters' sensitization, the presence of INEC in the cyberspace and how INEC can make itself more active in the cyberspace for effective information dissemination and voter education.

**Keywords:** INEC; Social media; Voter sensitization; Information dissemination; Cyberspace

## Introduction

The use of social media in politics has continued to grow in recent times. Since Barack Obama broke the world record in the history of social media use for political purpose during the 2008 US presidential elections, many nations and politicians across the globe have continued to embrace the platform to mobilize their citizens and candidates towards active participation in the political process [1]. It was argued that four key stakeholders in the electoral process (The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), politicians/political parties, the electorate, and Civil Society Organizations) made extensive use of social media during the 2011 and the 2015 elections in Nigeria. Each of these stakeholders used the social media to achieve a number of interrelated objectives. Based on the arguments, it is concluded that social media platforms have fundamentally aided political communication in Nigeria [2]. Social media is the place for consuming political news and knowledge for the majority of

young people. It is where they discuss politics and feel like their most civic selves. Hence, social media being the source of political dialogue is the perfect platform to engage potential voters and turn them into committed voters [3]. The Pew Internet & American Life project survey found at the time of the 2010 election in that 23 percent of Americans "had tried to convince someone to vote for a specific candidate" and 10 percent "had attended a political rally". With the help of social media, ordinary citizens can become agents of persuasion and leverage their personal network for whatever values, issue positions, or ideological stances that they cherish [4]. Mobilization could be seen as the process by which candidates, parties, activists, and groups induce other people to participate in politics to win elections, to pass bills, and to influence policies [5]. There is no reason why 2012 should not be an engaging election. With the issues we face in the areas of budget deficits, taxes, health care, education, energy, and foreign policy, we should use digital technology to involve people in the campaign [3].

## Role of Social Media in Political Awareness

In a modern democracy, social media can be used by governments to involve citizens in decision making, and by civil society to engage people in specific issues. However social media can also be used to broaden political participation by helping citizens to communicate with their representatives and with each other [6]. The use of social media as a formidable force for social engineering and political electioneering has continued to grow. The technology is participatory, interactive and cost-effective. This has made it the medium of the moment as far as political communication and participation are concerned [7].

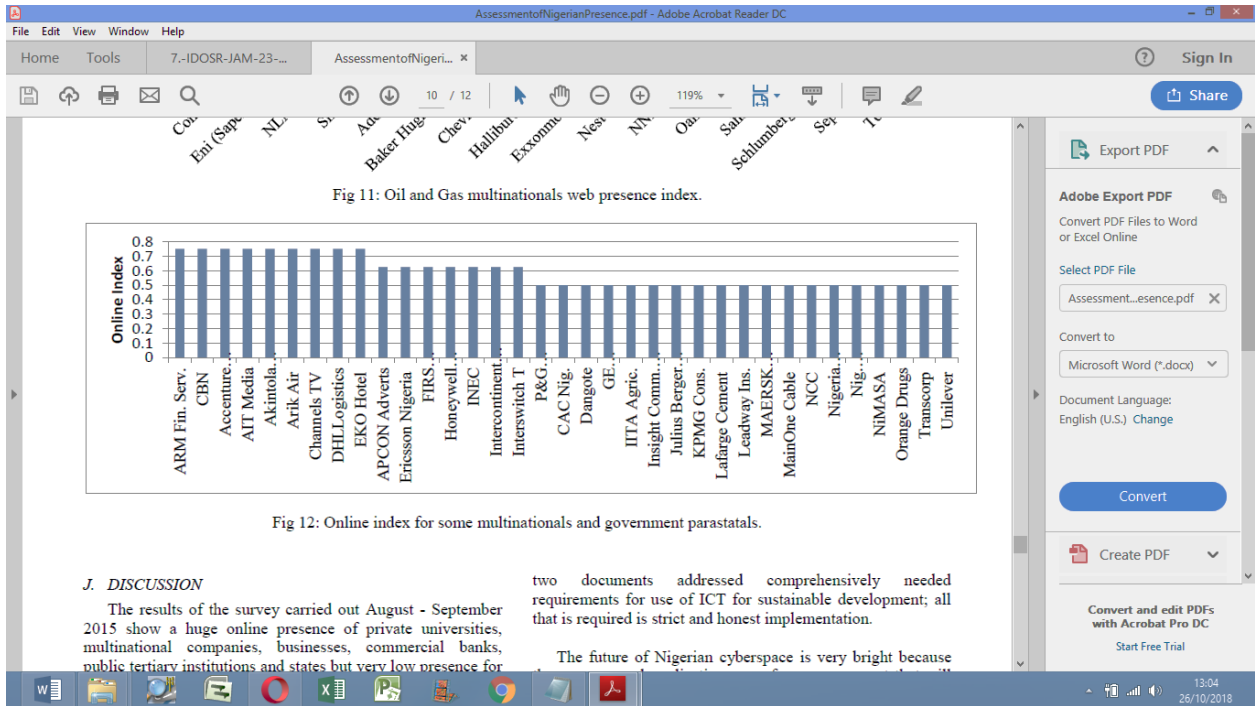
The role of youth in electoral activities cannot be over emphasised. They play active role in mobilising support for candidates and actual voting. They are the active participants of election violence and also the active users of social media. Disseminating useful information to youth in form of voter education is a means of forestalling incidences of election violence and electoral manipulations. Data released by statista.com indicated that there are 84.3 million internet users in Nigeria and that by 2019, there would be 93 million internet users. Chukwuemeka Afigbe, Manager Developer programme at Facebook revealed that about 26 million Nigerians now login on

Facebook every month. Social media is indeed the best avenue for reaching out to majority of the voters.

**INEC Presence in the Cyberspace**

Cyberspace is now critical to every nation’s socio-economic, cultural and political activities. When it is disrupted or fails, a

country may experience strong adverse effects. On the contrary, its correct functioning and pliability is transforming modern society with exceptional pecuniary and social benefits. With many activities increasingly moving to the Internet, cyberspace has become a new stage for innovations, enterprises, social networking, criminality and war [8].



**Figure 1:** Online index for some multinationals and government.

The above diagram (Figure 1) estimated INEC presence in the cyberspace to 0.615. INEC is rated alongside Federal Inland Revenue Service (FIRS), Honeywell Company, Ericsson Nigeria and inters witch while organizations like Central Bank of Nigeria, Arm Financial service, Arik air and Eko hotel were rated higher than INEC. None of the organization or parastatals rated

alongside or above INEC in reality should be rated close to INEC who pride itself of 84million registered voters ahead of 2019 general election. No organization or parastatals can boast of such data; yet it seems INEC is not doing much to make itself more pronounced in the cyber space.

**Table 1:** Comparing INEC presence in social space with selected organizations and personalities as at Friday, 6<sup>th</sup> October, 2018.

	Social Media	INEC	Gtbank (Commercial outfit)	Channels TV (Media house)	Wizkid (Celebrity)	Bukola saraki (Politician)
1	Facebook	3,12,821	6.6 million	1.23 million	1.93 million	5,29,440
2	Twitter	1.04 million	1.44 million	3.06 million	4.38 million	1.39 million
3	Instagram	56,800	447,000	208,000	6.2 million	275,400
4	YouTube	49; 55 videos	20,000; 236 video	229,000	433,000	No Presence

Table 1 compares the presence of INEC in the cyberspace with some organizations and personalities in Nigeria. Wizkid, a young Nigerian celeb and Bukola Saraki, a prominent politician both beat INEC in popularity and presence in the social space; whereas INEC with over 84 million voters in its database in reality is more popular than both of them. More works are needed to be done to improve INEC presence in the social space.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are necessary to make INEC presence more pronounced in the cyber space:

- Post promotion: Every post of INEC should hence forth be promoted on Facebook and Instagram to reach more people. The more people see INEC posts and either likes or

comments on it, it boost INEC presence in the social space. According to Facebook, "of the 1,500+ stories a person might see whenever they log onto Facebook, the newsfeed displays approximately 300." [9] Facebook's post promotion allows you target your audience by a number of different characteristics including: Location, Job Title, Age, Gender, Interests, Behaviors and Connections [9].

- Page promotion: INEC should ensure it attracts nothing less than 10 million fans on Facebook and twitter before 2019 general election. This can be achieved by promoting INEC Facebook page through targeting. It has a financial implication though.
- Persistent posting: Facebook's highest traffic usually occurs mid-week between 1 to 3 pm which tells us two things - 1) Almost everyone hits that after lunch productivity slump than we think and 2) people are always looking for new content on their newsfeeds [9].
- Picture posts: According to KISSmetrics, photos get 53% more likes, 104% more comments, and 84% more clicks on links than text-based posts. Photos also stick out like a sore thumb (in a good way) in the comments section so try responding to customer posts or even the content of peers to attract more engagement [9].
- Professionalism: handlers of INEC social media must be sound in Information Technology and proficient in English language. They must understand the workings and programmes of INEC and should be conversant with real life situation on the field i.e. in states and local government areas. They must be patient and mature enough to handle insults and abuses from aggrieved voters.
- Presence and engagement: Handlers must always be online to attend to people's query or questions both positive and negative. Every post should be responded to within 2 minutes. The response could be in form of apologies, explanation, education or smiley. This would boost people confidence in INEC. INEC events can be transmitted live on social media. E.g. Facebook live and YouTube live. The more people "like", comment, share, and view your posts, the more your posts will appear in their timeline. All you have to do is get their attention once and maintain it forever [9]. There is the need to ask questions. Social media is all about having a two-way conversation with your prospects and customers. Asking questions is one of the easiest and most-

effective ways to increase Facebook engagement and gain valuable insight from your audience [9].

- Participation: Every staff of INEC must be made to subscribe to INEC social media platforms. They should be actively involved in liking, commenting and sharing posts from INEC.
- Presentation: simple and short posts with clarity, void of ambiguity. Clear and quality pictures with clear descriptions should always be posted.

## Conclusion

As a commission that is planning to go fully electronic in few years to come, INEC cannot afford to have a limited presence in the cyber space. It should rise to use the many dividend of technology to its advantage. It is believed that social media can help reduce costs of educating voters and getting them acquainted with INEC plans and programmers.

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