New Media, Old Politics:
Digital Media, Elections and Democracy Consolidation in Nigeria

Matthew Adeiza

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I.   Abstract

Research on democracy consolidation in Africa pays little attention the role information technologies play in mediating political relations between individual politicians and citizens. On the other hand, media research has not done enough to account for how existing socio-political relations potentially define the use of media for political purposes. Drawing from a recent governorship election in Nigeria, this paper argues that local issues can determine how social media are framed and used in political campaigns. In the election central to this study, the incumbent seeking reelection boasted superior social media in both strategy and deployment. But the opposition candidate eventually won the race by framing social media as a tool of the elite meant to bypass ordinary citizens. Thus, by depicting himself as a "man of the street," the opposition candidate galvanized aggrieved groups within the state to achieve an unlikely victory. The paper is based on two weeks of interviews with top campaign officials of the opposition campaign.

II.   Digital Media, Elections and Democracy Consolidation in Nigeria

1.   Introduction

Despite the general paucity of economic infrastructure in sub-Saharan Africa, over the past decade this region has experienced some of the fastest growth rates in mobile phone and Internet penetration in the world. In Nigeria, mobile phone subscription has risen from just over 866,000 in 2001 to over 121 million as of October 2013. During the same period, Internet users rose from 200,000 to 57 million (NCC, 2013). These technologies are now major social connectors, and there is hope that they may be transforming political life by enhancing democratic consolidation and increasing the quality of democracy. Technology potentially has the power to make elections in Nigeria more transparent and to encourage citizens to expect accountability from elected leaders (Adewumi & Daramola, 2010; Etzo & Collender, 2010; Ifukor, 2010; Olorunnisola & Douai, 2013; Schuler, 2008; Smyth & Best, 2013).

If elections have become more transparent, cases of pre- and post-election violence continue to persist (Lewis, 2011). The violence may be due in part to incitement communicated over the new media, which the state appears unable to control (Lewis, 2011; Smyth & Best, 2013; Tar & Zack-Williams, 2007). However, on other occasions, mobile phones and social media have been instrumental in fostering stability by dispelling rumors and disseminating facts (Smyth and Best, 2013). The digital media is not the only force at work in these elections. Tensions between parties and groups pose a serious challenge to this fragile democracy as manipulative politicians play voters off against each other in a bid to cling onto power (Berman, Eyoh, and Kymlicka, 2004; Nyamnjoh, 2005b).

Two bodies of literature may offer understanding as to why the digital media has not had a transformational effect on democracy on the African continent, even though this media has greatly improved the logistical coordination for elections and political campaigns. Firstly, mainstream African political science literature advances that ethnic tensions, intense competition for state power and resources, and weak state institutions are responsible for electoral violence and the fragile democracies of many African countries (see Berman et al., 2004). Another body of literature focuses on the use of digital media in African elections. According to these various studies, the

effects of the digital media on democracy varies greatly. In some instances, it seems to create efficiency and transparency in the electoral process (Bailard and Livingston, Forthcoming; Smyth and Best, 2013); in other instances, it contributes to widespread disillusionment resulting in the refusal by many citizens to vote in elections (Bailard, 2012). The study of digital media is still a developing field and there is no agreement about the overall effects of it on elections or democratization.

But these two bodies of literature, studying the old and new media respectively, have generally not interacted, and as a result a significant knowledge gap exists. Yet, it is clear that the media has played a decisive role in African politics. Nationalists who fought for independence made extensive use of the media, and postcolonial governments generally used the media to promote development policies and programs. So both political science and digital media research will mutually benefit from incorporating existing socio-political factors into the analyses of how new digital media technologies are utilized for political advantage in Sub-Saharan Africa. This paper assumes that technology and society are constantly at work on each other. Technology brings new opportunities to the political process, but its use is strongly influenced by historical and social realities.

This paper aims to bridge the gap between political science and digital media literature in Sub-Saharan African. It explores how the use of digital media by political elites has interacted with socio-political and historical factors, and ultimately shaped the outcome of the governorship election in Nigeria's Ekiti state. Ekiti has a low rate of Internet use, but high mobile phone use. The paper investigates how politicians adopted these new digital media and other traditional channels of communication for political campaigning, internal campaign communication, and inter-elite bargaining. Two aspects of the election campaign process are of particular interest. Firstly, the way the elites framed digital media use in public discourse as compared to its actual use in the campaigns, and, secondly, what the campaigns perceived as the best use for digital media: political bargaining or reaching voters with their message.

2. The Concept of Democracy Consolidation in Africa

Democracy consolidation is a hotly debated concept among political scientists, and there is no agreement as to what it means and how best to measure it. Scholars usually take two approaches in the debate: minimalist or maximalist. For minimalists – those who restrict their conceptualization to a few features that can be easily measured – democracy consolidation is the process of securing new democracies against reversals and ensuring that they survive beyond the short period after the transition from authoritarianism (Schedler, 1998). From this perspective, the defining feature of a consolidated democracy is the "expectations of regime continuity" (1998, p. 90) where the possibility of regression into authoritarianism is significantly diminished. For Huntington (1991), this is the point where the "most powerful collective decision makers are selected through fair, honest and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote" (p.7). This assertion echoes Dahl (1975) who argues that the two defining features of a democracy are competition and participation.

The challenge with this approach is that it places too much emphasis on election and political participation, and seems to assume that merely holding free and fair periodic elections is enough. But as experience in many African countries has shown, it is possible for a leader to organize and win "credible elections" by co-opting important groups who may not share these ideals. Common methods of co-option include promises of political appointments, contracts, bribes, "gifts," or privileges.

Maximalists consider democracy consolidation more than the mere survival of a democracy. For them, there must be "total institutionalization of democratic practices" (Bratton and Van de Walle,

1997) to the point where democracy has become the "only game in town" (Linz and Stepan, 1996), and "democratic practices" such as rule of law, free and fair elections, and respect for human rights are fully entrenched. The maximalist conceptualization has one important benefit: It allows for processes beyond elections to be considered in the establishment of democracies. Yet, the maximalist point of view is difficult to measure due to the unlimited number of variables, which it is possible to consider.

In this election study, I take the middle road and describe democracy consolidation as the tendency of political actors and citizens to pursue legal and peaceful means to achieve political goals. From this perspective, elections are contested between parties in an open and fair manner, and citizens freely choose their candidates without fear or intimidation. Even when electoral processes are not perfect and government is not completely transparent, people are willing to use legal and peaceful means to address perceived injustices. This practice allows institutions to grow despite being constantly tested by conflicts between the political actors.

3.   How Digital Media Aid Democracy Consolidation

Literature on digital media and democracy in Africa largely focuses on activist use of digital media in protests and elections (Bailard, 2012; Bailard and Livingston, forthcoming). Much of the writings on how the Internet is "revolutionizing" democracy in Africa are largely anecdotal media reports with little empirical data or attention to the mechanisms of the claimed effects. Some scholars (Olabamiji, 2014; Smyth and Best, 2013; Ugor, 2009) have conducted more empirically grounded studies of digital media use during election periods. Scholars of political communication are interested in election periods because political activities are heightened and attitudes and behaviors are more easily observable. The study of the impact of digital media on elections is necessitated, in part, by the African elites' historical manipulation of traditional mass media for political purposes (Schedler, 1998).

Some scholars argue that digital media could improve the logistical coordination and the overall efficiency of elections. For example, Bailard and Livingston (forthcoming) studied online communication during Nigeria's 2011 general elections and found that online crowd-sourced reports helped electoral officers reallocate resources to areas where there were inadequate materials, and possibly affected the overall voter turnout. It is important to point out, however, that the data they analyzed only showed correlations between crowd-sourced reports and voter turnouts, which could have happened for completely different reasons.

A different experimental study of Internet users by Bailard (2012) in Tanzania during the country's election found that online users were more likely to be disillusioned and not vote. She argues that this disillusionment may be created by the users' exposure to online information about life in developed countries, fostering the attitude among some voters that their own political system is so bad it does not deserve their participation. This argument assumes that people do not use other media (such as satellite television) and that such media is unable to expose them to Western economic development as convincingly as the Internet. This is a debatable assumption, but the research is interesting. It shows that rather than motivating people to vote, the Internet may have "window opening effects" on the electorate that discourages voting.

To Smyth and Best (2013), social media use in Liberia and Nigeria helped fill the gap of the traditional media, which had an inadequate presence in these countries, while also acting as watchdogs over politicians who might otherwise attempt to rig elections. They also argue that the speed of information sharing on social media may also have reduced the level of suspicion of malpractice, and ensured the acceptance of election results. The authors acknowledge, however,

that these benefits were only available to people with social-media access – elites and politically active young people. The large majority of citizens may never have heard of social media, let alone benefit from its use.

Two events that took place after the elections in Nigeria and Liberia also merit consideration. Though observers reported that the elections were free and fair, post-election violence broke out in northern Nigeria claiming hundreds of lives, while a smaller-scale violence erupted in Liberia and was only diffused after quick international intervention (BBC, 2011; Lewis, 2011; Tar and Zack-Williams, 2007). These incidents raise the question, as Lewis (2011) poses in the case of Nigeria, why more transparent elections lead to more violence. Lewis argues that unmanaged tensions and mutual suspicions between religious and ethnic groups erupted into violence despite the generally transparent electoral process.

4. Why the Nature of Local Rivalry Matters

Ethnic rivalry and conflict in Nigeria and much of Africa are largely a result of its encounter with Europe rather than some primordial attitudes carried over to the 21st century (Berman et al., 2004). Berman and colleagues note that the enthusiasm in the early 1990s that followed the return of many African authoritarian governments to multiparty faded as a result of "communal divisions, particularly of ethnicity and religion" (Berman et al., 2004, p. 1). They argue that ethnic divisions in Africa will not disappear with more "modernity" because they "represent critical aspects of the particular African experience of modernity itself," an experience deeply rooted in colonialism and post-colonial neoliberal policies forced on new African states.

While the colonial state created ethnic identities and broke pre-colonial relations of kinship and political units, the post-colonial state is dominated by market forces, leading to a situation where group identities have emerged as an individuals' primary source of security and support, and the basis of fierce competition between groups for "both the traditional assets of land and labor and the material resources of modernity in both the state and the market" (Berman et al., 2004, p. 3).

In one of the most important works written on ethnicity and democracy in Africa, Berman et al. assert that the post-colonial state emerged as the most important "source of wealth and power" and inevitably became the focus of struggles to acquire both. Citizens sought patrons through whom they could have access to state resources but this led to "an amoral free-for-all for control" in the absence of strong institutions to regulate competition. Weak state institutions means that personality politics linked to group identity remains the currency of political relations in many African countries, especially in Nigeria, which has over 350 ethnic groups.

In Nigeria, ethnic and regional competition has intensified with the return to democracy in 1999 after decades of military rule, and, as Suberu (2001) argues, remains a serious threat to democracy consolidation. By the late 1990s, the country was already divided into 36 states with each state further divided into three senatorial districts, usually along ethnic lines, in a bid to bring the government closer to the people and create a sense of inclusiveness. The problem with this arrangement lies in the "hyper-centralization" of resources and power in the executive at both federal and state levels (2001, p. 173), which encourages aggressive competitions for executive power. Thus, competing groups seem to approach elections with the logic of "it is our time to chop" (Lindberg, 2003), which in standard English means "it is out time to eat (from the national cake)."

As the following study reveals, whatever logistical efficiency digital media may or may not bring to elections in Nigeria (and perhaps Africa as a whole), its greatest effect may be mediating between competing group interests and relations. No matter how useful the digital media may be for election

monitoring, it will not significantly transform politics unless it enables previously unfriendly groups to relate better and develop friendships that will discourage violence.

5. Digital Media and Ekiti State Election in Nigeria

Ekiti state held an election for governor on June 21, 2014 with two main contestants – incumbent Kayode Fayemi of the All Progressives Congress and Ayodele Fayose of the People's Democratic Party. Nigeria's federal system is patterned after the US system with state governors serving as the chief executives of their states. Campaign strategies in the lead up to the election were discussed in the national media as contests between the three senatorial districts in the state with the current governor's performance taking a backseat as he sought reelection (Nwaoko, 2014). The state is ethnically homogenous but the three senatorial districts contest for the governor's seat. The opposition candidate, Fayose, won the election and the incumbent Kayode Fayemi conceded defeat once the results were officially announced. Observers, journalists, and most citizens agree that the election was free and credible even if its fairness was questionable due to the excessive use of security forces that Fayemi's party alleged was meant to intimidate its supporters.

The election was one of the best in Nigeria's recent electoral history. Yet, in the run up to the election, there were reports that security forces harassed supporters of the APC party, which ruled in Ekiti, but was in opposition on the federal level. The APC accused the federal government of using the pretext of security concerns to deploy over 12,000 security forces to intimidate its supporters not to vote. For some APC members, this deployment tipped the election in favor of Fayose after security forces disrupted their efforts to reach voters in the final days of campaigning. The security forces denied partisan involvement, and challenged critics to present evidence. Several citizens interviewed acknowledged receiving gifts of money and foodstuff from both parties in the run up to the election, but it is unclear if the disruption of any party's gift-giving strategy negatively affected its chances. The research for this paper was guided by questions, such as: During campaigning, how did the elites' public discourse about digital media use compare with their actual digital media practices? How do politicians communicate with their constituencies and supporters during an election? To what extent does the choice of a media channel correspond with the type of message politicians want to send?

6. Method

The paper adopts an interpretive and grounded theory approach to the study. Grounded theory allows data and theory to interact in a back and forth process until the phenomenon under study has been reasonably explained (Creswell, 2013). In-person interviews were conducted in Ekiti from June 17 – 25, 2014 and further targeted interviews over the next two months. The preliminary findings are discussed in this paper. The interviews involve political party leaders, grassroots foot soldiers, religious leaders, and top current and former civil servants. Several citizens of the state were interviewed in informal chats to gain understanding of general attitudes in the state.

Interviews were conducted in the subjects' offices where possible, or at a secure and convenient location in Ado-Ekiti, the state capital. The interviews were recorded with the aid of a digital audio recorder and then downloaded to my laptop and transcribed for analysis.

7. Findings: Media Framing and Use

Both parties framed the election in two main interrelated ways – as a contest between elites and the people, and as a modern, digital media-savvy candidate against a traditional old-school campaigner.

While the former framing was prevalent in Ekiti, the later was prominent in the Nigerian media, both online and mainstream. Though politicians framed the digital media as innovative platforms for interacting with voters and listening to their needs, they used these media differently.

Firstly, the two parties sought to frame each other in order to gain an advantage with voters. While the campaign of opposition candidate Ayodele Fayose succeeded in portraying the incumbent Governor Kayode Fayemi as an elitist leader who does not care about the "common man," the Fayemi campaign tried rather unsuccessfully to portray Fayose as a thug unfit to lead the state. Fayose's campaign team stressed that Governor Fayemi's only interest was in promoting projects that benefit the elites, and not the common man. Though the incumbent had "done well" by Nigerian standards in developing various infrastructural projects, such as road construction, his challenger succeeded in convincing people that he did little to provide *stomach infrastructure:* put food on the peoples' table. Stomach infrastructure could be achieved through government employment, random distribution of cash*,* or awarding of contracts to local contractors (whom the incumbent claimed were not qualified to carry out his high tech projects.) Thus, in defining "us" against "them," the winning candidate successfully defined "them" as the elites whom the incumbent represents and "us" as the "common man" whom he represents.

A second frame used by both political parties was how digital media proved good for campaigning in a state with low Internet use. For example, the PDP's candidate Ayo Fayose, who claimed that he was "a grassroots politician" and "not a social media person" (Fabiyi & Olokor, 2014), used SMS text messages extensively during campaigning. His team sought to portray digital media users as elites who do not care about the common man. As *a man of the people*, Fayose claimed to interact with constituents face-to-face in order to understand their problems. He argued that this style was unlike the incumbent who was detached from the people. In several informal chats before the election, many potential voters cited this as a reason they would vote for Fayose – because he interacts with them and knows their problems, which upon close inspection is a claim that was largely exaggerated. The records shows that Fayose may have interacted with ordinary people a few times, the incumbent also held town hall meetings. But by defining himself as the opposite of the aloof incumbent leader, Fayose cemented his image as a man of the people whom voters could trust.

These two frames were starkly different from what the media had portrayed before the elections, and shows how politicians could be creative in using local issues to their advantage. Importantly, it shows that Nigerian politicians are not necessarily tied to a single identity – they choose identities based on what would help win elections. An interesting aspect this change in framing is that it created less incentive for violence – district loyalties would have been a greater spark for violent contentions, it now appears.

8. **Smart SMS Campaigns**

The two candidates also made extensive use of SMS text messaging for different purposes. Fayemi's campaign collected people's phone numbers irrespective of party affiliations and sent out short campaign messages to them from an official "Reelect Fayemi" screen name, as well as from at least one unofficially affiliated account. Messages from the unofficial account include accusations of misconduct by Fayose and his party thugs, and charges of corruption against Fayose from his first term in office as governor. (Fayose was impeached in October 2006 following fraud allegations.) Fayose's campaign also used a slightly different strategy. They employed the official PDP's screen name to send instructions about upcoming rallies or to debunk rumors to only PDP members. But they also used middlemen to send out messages they considered too risky to be officially associated, such as rumors of impending sacking of civil servants, or allegations of misconduct against the incumbent. For example, a day before the election, an SMS was sent with a screen name of the Labor Party, the state's third most prominent party, stating that Labor leader Bamidele Opeyemi would step down, and that Labor supporters should support the PDP and Fayose. While Opeyemi

immediately denied he was leaving the race, the damage may have been irreversible. Many voters believed there was an secret agreement between the two candidates that Opeyemi was refusing to acknowledge, which they viewed as an endorsement of Fayose. The Fayose campaign team denied sending the SMS, but most people interviewed believed they did.

9. New Media, Old Politics?

Despite the pattern of digital media use among various political actors, an interesting feature of both campaigns was their strategic calculations for winning the election. For many top politicians and lower rank members of the campaign teams, digital media use was seen as an opportunity to reach voters, and not necessarily for voters to reach them. While a few acknowledged receiving text messages on their personal phones about potentially harmful incidents that they were able to address swiftly, they did not view these platforms as an opportunity to engage voters. Ideally, digital media facilitates interaction between voters and candidates. But that was not the case. For the Fayose campaign, being online gave it the opportunity to counter lies against its candidate and present an alternative image. In order to win, one party official said, they had to ensure there was a "balance in the political process" – a veiled reference to pre-election negotiations to win support among major stakeholders.

The PDP had to placate its most popular candidate, Prince Dayo Adeyeye, with the promise of a ministerial position after he lost the primaries to Fayose. Similarly, other appointments were promised to appease popular politicians who might pose a threat to Fayose' election bid. These appointments were possible in Etiki because Fayose's party controls the federal government, and PDP's President Goodluck Jonathan was eager to offer any support to win this state election, a victory he viewed as a support base for his possible reelection in 2015.

Yet, these moves do not explain why the incumbent lost so overwhelmingly. According to sources interviewed, other reasons for his defeat include his alleged refusal to support a federal school for his local government (hence they voted against him), his failure to implement projects that generate income for the common man, his inaccessibility, his policy of civil service reforms and a dispute with teachers, his perceived aloofness, his appointment of experts rather than politicians into his cabinet, and his uncompromising stance on corruption. While some accusations may sound frivolous, the opposition effectively used them to frame him as an elitist who is out of touch with the people and is undeserving of a second term.

10. Conclusion

The Ekiti state governorship election presented an interesting case to explore the interaction between politics and the use of digital media by politicians. The preliminary findings indicate that the winner of the election was able to use digital media to his advantage while framing them as elitist tools. The candidates framed and used digital media differently during the election. While the winning candidate, who presented himself as "grassroots politician," framed digital media as irrelevant, his team cleverly used SMS mobile phone messaging to frame the incumbent as elitist and out of touch with the people. Both parties used digital media to mobilize support. This runs against the supposed benefit of digital media as a platform to bring leaders and citizens together. For most politicians, winning is still a matter of making the right alliances rather than taking their case to the people. In this election, the successful candidate refused to participate in a candidates' debate, and still won.

Though the election was free and credible, and the political actors extensively used the new digital media, they did not meaningfully change the way politics is done. Though the losing candidate initially conceded defeat, he later rejected the result, stating that his initial concession was to

prevent violence. In the end, the digital media provided new weapons for the political elites to wage wars of old politics.

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III. About the Project

1. Correspondence

Please direct correspondence to adeiza [at]uw [dot]edu

2. About the Authors

Matthew Adeiza is a PhD student in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington in Seattle, United States, where he studies the impact of digital media on politics in Africa. He has a bachelor's degree in Mass Communication from the University of Jos, Nigeria, and a master's in African Studies from St Antony's College, University of Oxford, United Kingdom. He is currently studying how political candidates use digital media for political campaigning in Nigeria and Ghana.

IV. Institutions and Funding

1. The Center for Media, Data and Society
The Center for Media, Data and Society is the leading center of research on media, communication, and information policy in Central and Eastern Europe. Based in the School of Public Policy at Central European University, CMDS produces scholarly and practice-oriented research addressing academic, policy and civil society needs. CMDS research and activities address media and communication policy, social media and free expression, civil society and participation, fundamental communication and informational rights, and the complexities of media and communication in transition.

2. The School of Public Policy
The School of Public Policy (SPP) at Central European University, in the words of its founder, George Soros, is a "new kind of global institution dealing with global problems" through multi-disciplinary study of public policy, innovative teaching and research, as well as meaningful engagement with policy practice.

3. Central European University
Central European University (CEU) is a graduate-level, English-language university accredited in the U.S. and Hungary and located in Budapest. The university offers degrees in the social sciences, humanities, law, public policy, business management, environmental science, and mathematics. CEU has more than 1,500 students from 100 countries and 300 faculty members from more than 30 countries.