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When Freedom of Expression Goes Awry on Social Media: An Analysis of Comments on Naij.Com in the Run-Up to the 2015 Presidential Elections in Nigeria

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I. Introduction

The 2015 presidential election in Nigeria may have come and gone but the dust it raised is yet to settle completely. The election was palpably one of the most keenly contested in the annals of Nigeria's politics after the June 12, 1993 presidential election. Although available statistics show that low voter turnout was recorded across the country compared to the number of registered voters, observations made on social media, discussions on the streets, on commuter buses, at drinking spots, and other informal social gatherings, where the Nigerian electorate had cause to discuss issues concerning the election, especially the two leading presidential candidates – Dr. Goodluck Ebele Jonathan (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari (APC), it was obvious that Nigerians were determined to effect a major change of government in the 2015 elections at all levels, particularly the presidency.

It would be recalled that the June 12 1993 presidential election was not only keenly contested also, it attracted massive voter turnout across the country, and the driving force was 'change' of government, this time from military dictatorship to democracy. Similarly, the dire need for change was also a major push factor for the active participation of the electorate in the 2015 general elections.

Every available and accessible medium was maximally utilized by the electorate and candidates to canvass for votes. The traditional media were the most active because they offered a 'novel' and accessible platform to virtually everyone who owned a smart phone or a handset that could browse or surf the net to express support and canvass votes for their preferred candidates. According to Omojuwa (2015) "The social media which started out as a playground for mostly young jobless people, became the battle ground of what could arguably be described as the most competitive election in Nigeria's history."

The high level of competitiveness ordinarily was considered healthy for the country's inchoate democracy, but for the 'win-at-all-cost' tendency that crept in as the campaigns reached fever pitch. Candidates and their supporters became desperate and threw caution to the winds by adopting every available means to outdo the opponent at the polls. In fact, both unethical and unprofessional media campaign strategies were brazenly employed to either retain power or wrest power, as the case may be. Traditional and social media advertisement campaigns were generally considered unprecedentedly hateful and in bad taste.

Social media no doubt provided a somewhat 'novel' platform for unfettered freedom of expression in the 2015 general elections, which increased the electorates' participation in the country's political discourse, and also raised voters' awareness and consciousness as the principal deciders in who governs them at every level. But whether or not this freedom was responsibly used by social media users in the run-up to the 2015 presidential election is the major concern of this paper. This is in view of the fact that there were obvious indications that freedom of speech might have

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gone awry at some point if what went on in the traditional media is anything to go by.

Therefore, considering current zero-regulatory status of the social media in the country, and the level and pattern of adoption by the citizenry, there is need to appraise the performance of the social media with regard to abuse or otherwise of freedom of expression using this all important window of opportunity in order to safeguard our nascent democracy and fragile national unity.

II. Research Questions

The following research questions are articulated with a view to address the problem raised earlier as to whether or not social media users abused their freedom of expression while expressing support and canvassing votes for their preferred candidates and parties in the run-up to the 2015 presidential election. The questions are also meant to find out the direction of comments, whether the direction of comments portrayed any element of tribal and religious sentiments, and if the direction of comments was in anyway reflected in the result of the presidential election.

RQ1. What is the direction of comments about candidates on *facebook* in the run-up to the 2015 presidential election?

RQ2. Are there indications that the direction of users' comments were born out of tribal and religious sentiments?

RQ3. Did the direction of users' comments reflect in the results of the presidential election?

RQ4. Did *facebook* users abuse their freedom of expression in their comments?

III. Methodology

Content analysis research method was used for this study. The following content categories were delineated for the purpose of coding the contents of comments the selected *facebook* page concerning the two leading candidates in the 2015 presidential election:

- Abusive
- Inflammatory
- Endorsement
- Rejection
- Neutral

Sampling was purposively done to get every available comment on any post on both candidates on the selected *facebook* pages. This to ensure that all shades of comment in the period under analysis is accommodated. Meanwhile the *facebook* page was selected on the basis of availability and activeness during the period under review. To this extent therefore, *Naij.com*, a news media page on *facebook*, was perceived the most active page with regular, up-to-date posts on candidates, and with a lot of followers.

IV. Review of Literature

Election is an inseparable component of democracy. The international Encyclopaedia of social sciences vol. 5 defines election as the procedure of aggregating preferences of a particular kind- cited in Okonkwo, 2015. The procedure is as important as the preferences it eventually or ultimately throws up. If the procedure is marred by irregularities of any kind, the preferences become questionable and unacceptable.

Ujo (2010) cited in Okonkwo (2016), describes election as a procedure that allows members of an organization or community to choose representatives who will hold positions of authority within it. Ujo isolated the following key components of the election process which interplay to determine who emerges winner in any democratic setting: political campaigns, political rallies, political talks, televised debates, political advertisements, etc. these activities cannot achieve their predetermined goals without the mass media. The media play an indispensable role in the proper functioning of a democracy. Beyond providing information about candidates for elective positions, they enable full public participation in the electoral process by providing information that, as far as possible, avoid inflammatory language, helping to prevent election-related violence, provide a platform for the public to communicate their concerns, opinions and needs, to the parties/ candidates, the electoral umpire, the government and to other voters to interact on these issues among others – (aceproject, 2015).

Media commercialism has, to a large extent, shrunk the space for participation in political discourse by majority of the electorate who do not have the means or financial muscle to appear in the media. But with the advent of the social media, this space has been expanded. Omojuwa (2015) speaks of social media as, "A space that was all about power brokers and media moguls which has become so deregulated you could consider it the freest space in Nigeria right now".

"Irrespective of its advantages of spreading information like wide fire, the social media platform could portend danger to the political landscape if the content is not well censored" (*Thisday live*, June 4, 201). In a bid to keep social media conversation safe and healthy for political participation, the Democratic Governance for Development (DGD II) project, a joint donor project managed by UNDP organized a two-day social media retreat in Uyo in December, 2014. The very well attended retreat reviewed threats to healthy social media engagements and strategies to avert them.

a) Relevant Theories

The democratic-participant media theory and the Social responsibility theory are relevant to this work. The main thrust of the democratic-participant media theory "Lies in its insistence that the existing

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bureaucracy as well as commercial and professional hegemony in media systems be broken down, so as to guarantee easier access for all potential users and consumers." (Folarin, 2002: 29). This access is what the social media tends to provide. On the other hand, the social responsibility theory suggests that freedom carries simultaneous obligations, and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under government, is obliged to be responsible to the society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication (Folarin, 2002).This principle applies to anyone who uses the media be it traditional or social media.

b) Data Presentation

Table showing direction of comments in relation to the region of commentators

Direction of Comments						
Region of Commentator	Abusive	Inflammatory	Endorsement	Rejection	Neutral	Total
South-West	6 (17%)	1 (3%)	8 (22%)	17 (47%)	4 (11%)	36 (100%)
North	4 (19%)	0 (0%)	4 (19%)	13 (62%)	0 (0%)	21 (100%)
East	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	18 (81%)	2 (9%)	1 (5%)	22 (100%)
South-south	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	16 (89%)	2 (11%)	0 (0%)	18 (100%)
Total	11 (11%)	1 (1%)	46 (47%)	34 (35%)	5 (5%)	N=97

The above table shows that out of a total of 97 comments analyzed, 11 (11%) were abusive, 1 (1%) was inflammatory, 46 (47%) were endorsement, 34 (35%) were rejection and 5 (5%) were neutral, which captures the profile of the direction of comments on *Naij.com facebook* page. It reveals that 17% of comments made by users from South-West Nigeria was abusive, the highest of all abusive comments analyzed. No abusive (0%) comment was made by users from South-south Nigeria, with Northern and Eastern users scoring 19% and 5%, respectively. More comments rejecting either of the presidential candidates were analyzed with Eastern Nigerian users posting more rejection comments (18) representing 81% of total rejection comments. South-south users followed with 16 comments, and the least came from the North.

V. Discussion/Suggestions

The findings revealed that social media users were abusive in their comments during the 2015 presidential election with a total of 11%. However, the result shows that users posted more comments endorsing candidates of their choice, 47%, and also rejecting candidates whom they do not want, 34%. The findings also show that comments followed ethnic or tribal lines. No abusive comment on a candidate was posted by users from South-south Nigeria (0%), while 6 out of a total of 11 abusive comments came from South-West users. The result of the 2015 presidential election also reflects tribal sentiments which were expressed on social media before the elections.

The implication is that people had the opportunity to express themselves on social media, but did not do so with the expected level of responsibility, which supports the revelations of the December 2014 Uyo retreat on healthy social media engagements, and *Thisday Live's* concern about the dangers of an uncensored social media platform to Nigeria's political landscape. The findings also imply that Nigeria is still divided along ethnic and religious line. What this therefore means is that work needs to be done by appropriate agencies to ensure proper orientation of Nigerians in the areas of religious and tribal tolerance and responsible use of the media, especially the social media. There is also the need for government to expedite action towards coming up with a workable policy framework for regulating the use of social media in Nigeria.

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