

Mobile Telephony and the Democratic Process in Nigeria: Wider Coverage, Limited Impact

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Abstract

The explosive growth and widespread presence of mobile telephony in Nigeria has attracted comments and research focusing on its social, economic, technological and cultural implications. However, scant attention, mostly newspaper comments, has been given to the contributions of mobile telephony to the democratic process in Nigeria. Given the centrality of communication to democracy and the nascence of Nigerian democracy, filling this gap is a worthwhile task. Using a questionnaire administered on literate phone users, and interviews with non-literate users, selected through a combination of purposive and convenience sampling techniques, we addressed the question: in what ways and to what extent has mobile telephony promoted critical democratic activities in Nigeria? There is widespread presence of mobile phone among respondents but limited use and limited impact. Only 49.7% of literate users used their phones for anything beyond sending and receiving calls and text messages; non-literate users had to depend on literate others for nearly everything pertaining to mobile phone use. Mobile phones were used in campaigns, provided information but not conviction about voting decisions: they did not make 70.8% of the respondents to vote or not to vote in certain ways. Mobile phones were found to be weak for post-election engagements and accountability as elected politicians were said to change their phone lines or bar incoming calls. We conclude that there is widespread application of the mobile phone to the democratic process in Nigeria but the impact of this application is only limited.

Keywords

Mobile telephony, Nigerian democracy, impact of mobile telephony, Nigerian politics

Introduction

Nigeria became a democracy again in 1999, and in 2007 went through the first successful civilian-to-civilian transition. The return to democracy was followed

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two years later by the emergence of mobile telephony in the country. The telecommunications market liberalisation was itself symbolic of the plurality of voices and ideas that should markedly nurture the nascent democracy into maturity (Olorunnisola, 2009; Onwumehili, 2009).

The mobile phone penetrated the country faster than its predecessors – newspapers, radio and television. In 2000, Nigeria's teledensity was 0.38% (Ndukwe, 2005) but by 2008, it had risen to 32.8%. In 2012, the teledensity rose to 70.8% with about 119 million connected lines (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2012). This phenomenal growth has, expectedly, attracted the attention of researchers who have focused on the socio-cultural (Olorunnisola, 2009), policy (Onwumehili, 2009), professional (Obijiofor, 2009), microeconomic (Adewoye and Obasan, 2010; Bakare and Gold, 2011), small group (Ojebode, Togunde and Abimbola, 2011), and interpersonal (Ojebode, 2012) implications of the mobile telephonic upsurge in the Nigerian context.

It is noteworthy, however, that the implications of the upsurge for the growth of democracy in Nigeria have been little studied. Beyond newspaper comments and analyses (NMEM, 2007; Okereocha, 2007; Adedokun, 2012), there is little empirical investigation into the ways in which the mobile phone is deepening democracy in Nigeria, if it is. Given the importance of mobile telephony, we find this gap worthy of attention.

In the peculiar Nigerian context, filling the gap should be of significance. Mobile telephone is one of the very few communication tools that are shared by citizens of divergent social, economic and geographical strata. Indeed, wherever mobile phones are used, they help to create an informative, connected, innovative, participative and converging society (Hellström, 2009). Whereas most other media and communication tools have the tendency of being under the control of the rich, male and urban citizens, mobile phones are as inclusive as a truly democratic tool should be. In addition, the mobile phone is 'many things': a good handset is a phone, an internet modem, a camera, and an internet surfing tool. In a country where access to the internet is limited, the mobile phone is indeed a handy filler of the internet vacuum.

Importantly, the mobile phone in Nigeria serves the function of extending the official limits of electoral campaign. The Nigeria electoral law prescribes that all media and public campaigns should cease 24 hours before voting. Governments have successfully enforced this rule with reference to traditional media, but they certainly cannot enforce it with reference to the use of mobile phone for electoral campaigns. Put differently, the mobile phone extends campaign hours.

Observers have noted that mobile phone activism was pervasive during the 2011 general elections in Nigeria (Adedokun, 2012). Civil society groups deployed the mobile phone in voter education and election monitoring and reporting. Two of the groups that stood out were ReclaimNaija and Coder

Pollwatch. These organizations, like several others, monitored voter registration, movement of voting materials, voting, vote counting and announcing. Most crucial to the focus of this study is their acclaimed involvement of the ordinary citizen as election monitors and reporters. They received and hoisted on their websites, voice and SMS reports. Coder Pollwatch had over 1,700 reports on eight categories of election-related problems (CoderPollwatch, 2012). ReclaimNaija had voice reports in the three major Nigerian languages and Pidgin, cutting across these problems as well (ReclaimNaija, 2012).

The foregoing justifies our exploration of the place of mobile telephoning in the development of democracy in Nigeria. We conceptualise democracy as a process that involves much more than periodic elections even if those are transparent. From literature, we identified three ingredients of democracy: periodic elections, ongoing dialogue between citizens and their representatives in power, and unwavering vigilance by the citizens against antidemocratic forces and tendencies. This investigation is guided by the broad question: in what ways and to what extent has mobile telephony promoted each of these democratic activities in Nigeria?

Mobile Telephony and the Democratic Process

The question of what the media do to society and specifically to democracy has engaged the attention of theorists and researchers for at least seven decades. The oldest theoretical and methodological camps — spanning the wide spectrum of powerful, moderate and minimal effects theories — were the products of various attempts to answer that question. Although mobile telephony is a recent technology, one can roughly divide literature on its impact on society and the democratic process into these three traditional theoretical camps.

Following sometimes anecdotal and sometimes empirical evidence, scholars and commentators have called attention to how powerfully mobile telephony is promoting democracy and citizen participation in different places in the world. For example, Celdran (2002), analysing the factors responsible for the ouster of Filipino President Joseph Estrada in 2001, gives a pride of place to mobile telephony especially the use of text messaging among (especially young) citizens. In his views, texting was a major tool in spreading information about the president's shady involvement with the underworld and in illegal number game. In a country where governance thrived on secrecy and iron-handedness, such an exposure was a critical damage to the president. He concluded that "text messaging has altered the traditional rules of political communication and mobilisation with far-reaching implications for the nature of citizenship in an age characterised by rapid innovations in information technology" (Celdran, 2002: 91).

Focusing on the 2004 Spanish general elections, Suárez (2005) showed how the use of short-message services (SMS) swung the polls in favour of the opposition and led to the defeat of the Popular Party. Shortly before the 2004 election, it was revealed that the government had lied about the sponsors of the 2004 terrorist attacks. The information, sent en-masse through SMS, led to widespread demonstrations on the eve of the Election Day, and protest voting against the government. Though Celdran (2002) and Suárez (2005) provided much background and related information that somewhat show that the 'revolution' was beyond the doing of just the SMS, the use of SMS was portrayed as primal to the outcome of the events in question.

In the African context, the widespread uptake of mobile phone informed by its attributes such as access, reach, adoption, interaction, cost and efficiency (Hellström, 2009) has led to renewed optimism about the potential they hold for stimulating political participation. Consequently, democracy advocates are exploiting the power of mobile phones through the use of SMS to monitor elections by transmitting important data in real time (Election Watch, 2017).

In addition to the issues of voting and election, mobile telephony has also received praises for socially and economically transforming societies (Scott, Batchelor, Ridley and Jorgensen, 2004; Adewoye and Obasan, 2010; Bakare and Gold, 2011). They are used to communicate with friends, take photos, play music and check e-mail. It has even been praised for reducing the scale and frequency of corruption in Africa: rise in mobile phone penetration was found to be connected with fall in perceived level of corruption in selected African countries (Bailard, 2010).

The foregoing attribution of importance to mobile telephony has some theoretical justifications. Democracy is impossible where the government controls access to media and tools of communication. From its Athenian precursor to its modern versions, democracy only thrives on open flow of information. Wherever and whenever this flow was clogged, democracy withers (Kornberg and Clarke, 1994; Post, 2005). For several decades after independence, telecommunications and sundry other means of communication in most African countries were controlled by government. It is thus understandable that the explosion in access to communication tools is sometimes interpreted in hypodermic terms by researchers and commentators (Papacharissi, 2002).

Nonetheless, this hypodermic interpretation is by no means a general trait. Many researchers have shown that mobile telephony, and indeed all of the new media, are not as powerful as they are sometimes portrayed to be. These include Berger (2002); Griffin, Trevorrow & Hapin (2006); Molony (2006); Olorunnisola (2009); Olorunnisola and Martin (2012). Adopting various approaches that stand opposite to technological determinism, these scholars acknowledged the potency of mobile telephony (in the democratic process) but also laid strong emphasis on cultural, economic, social and other contextual

factors that present moderating or accelerating effects to the impact of the technology.

Does the mobile telephone contribute powerfully, moderately or minimally to the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria? Is mobile telephony being fully deployed in the critical areas of the democratic process such as election, citizen-power holder engagement, and vigilance? These are questions that we seek to address in this study.

Methodology

We agree with Post (2005) on the centrality of 'self' (self-government, self-determination) in the democratic process. In line with this, we adopted a methodology that allows citizens to speak for themselves. We conducted a survey of phone users in Nigeria and combined that with an analysis of the contents of citizen-gathered SMS which they received from aspiring political representatives during electoral campaigns.

We combined purposive and convenience sampling methods to select respondents from various cultural, ethnic, political, social and economic strata. Respondents were chosen from two of Nigeria's six geo-political zones: Oyo State in the South-west and Benue State in the North-central. Selecting these two states ensured some level of diversity: Benue state is ruled by the party that is in power at the federal level; Oyo state is ruled by the party that leads the opposition at the federal level; Benue's governor is on his second term, Oyo's is on his first.

We administered a questionnaire that allows citizens to indicate how they responded to the electoral campaign texts stating if such texts influenced their voting decisions¹. Other items of the questionnaire allowed respondents to indicate if they used their phones to maintain contact with their elected representatives and to hold them accountable. Yet other items allowed citizens to indicate if they used their phones to rally other citizens, or were rallied by others for pro-democracy vigilance. A fertile locus was the December 2011 fuel subsidy protests in many parts of the country. In order to cater for non-literate citizens who were unable to respond to the questionnaire, we conducted oral interviews with them².

In all, out of the 200 copies of the questionnaire administered, 191 were found fit for analysis. Fifty respondents took part in the oral interviews which were conducted in the interviewee's preferred language. We acknowledge the small size of the sample of this self-sponsored fieldwork as a limitation. We attempted to enhance the representativeness of the sample by stratifying the

¹ Authors are grateful to Mathew Olaoye, J.O. Oyedele, T.A. Shittu (all in Oyo State), and Mbangohol Ikesh (Benue State) who rendered field assistance in the data collection process.

² Authors are grateful to Niyi Olagoke of the Department of Linguistics & African Languages for conducting some of the interviews.

population into different socio-demographic strata and selecting respondents across these strata. Quantitative data were analysed through simple percentages, while qualitative data were analysed through identification of recurrent themes and salience.

Data from the foregoing was fodder for a critical interrogation of the actual role of mobile phone in Nigeria in the recent past. Analysis shed insightful light on the hindrances that limit the democratic achievement of the mobile phone in the peculiar Nigerian context. This was the basis for our postulations about the potentials of the mobile phone as well as for suggestions towards deepening democracy through the mobile phone.

Findings

As we worked through the collected quantitative and qualitative data guided by our broad research question, four thematic points emerged: horizontal but not vertical penetration of mobile telephony; mobile phone as electoral informers but not persuasive convincers; open and close political dialogues, and little use in post-election vigilance. The following presentation is guided by these themes.

Horizontal but not Vertical Penetration

All our respondents to the questionnaire and interviewees had mobile telephone lines and handsets that were working. Many of the questionnaire respondents (40.5%) had more than one functional telephone line in separate handsets or in dual-SIM handsets. Our interviewees explained that having more than one telephone line was not a sign of affluence. "It is because you cannot depend on one line all the time; the network can fail anytime". They also claimed that having more than one line afforded them more opportunities to make intra-network calls which were cheaper than inter-network calls.

In spite of this wide penetration by the mobile telephone, responses showed a limited array of use by most phone users. All respondents to the questionnaire used their phones to make and receive calls, and to send and receive text messages. Few, however, used it for much more than that. Only 49%.0% of our respondents used their handsets to browse for information on the internet, and only 6.8% engaged in e-banking through their phones. Table 1 summarises the uses to which respondents put their mobile phones.

Table 1: Uses of Mobile Phones by (Literate) Respondents

S/N	Use	%
1.	Making calls	100
2.	Receiving calls	100
3.	Sending texts	100
4.	Receiving texts	100
5.	Checking and updating Facebook	49.7
6.	Browsing internet for information	48.7
7.	Sending and receiving e-mails	47.1
8.	Using 2go	31.4
9.	Twitting	15.7
10.	E-banking	6.8

(N = 191)

There is a sharp decline in the use of the mobile phone beyond its basic call and text functions. Further analysis showed that diversity of use of the mobile phone seemed to increase around certain demographic factors. For instance, 66.7% of those who used their phone for e-banking were those who had higher diploma, bachelor's or higher degrees. And when we checked "e-bankers" occupation, we found the highest 'occupational' group (41.7%) to be students. Most (47.1%) of those using their phones for Facebook were also students.

The case was different for our interviewees. Being non-literate, they rarely engaged in text messaging. When they did, they depended on literate friends and relatives for assistance. Checking and loading credit units are some of the tasks that the interviewees claimed they could not do except with assistance from literate others.

They creatively tagged their contacts with images and they knew that the green button is what to press in order to pick a call (This of course depends on the type of phone in use. The smart phones do not have the green and red button features). One of our interviewees said:

When I see a call and I see the picture of a car (on the screen) I know who is calling. They (my literate friends and family) helped me to do it that way. And I know if my phone is singing (ringing), I press this button (showing the green button).

Another said:

I have a song (ring tone) for each person. So, I know who is calling as soon as I hear the song.

Mobile phone use among these non-literate users did not go beyond the rudimentary. They did not know about e-banking or social media on mobile phones.

We sum the foregoing up by stating that though the mobile phone penetrated Nigeria across geographical, economic and other strata, that penetration was only horizontal – cutting across different groups. It is lacking in depth with regard to the number and diversity of tasks that individuals are able to perform with their phones.

Mobile phone in electoral campaigns: information without conversion

Responses to the questionnaire and at the interviews showed that the mobile phone was widely deployed during general electoral campaigns in Nigeria. The locus of this investigation was the 2011 elections. Most (152, that is, 79.6%) said they received text messages or calls from political contestants or their agents during the elections. Some (85, that is, 44.5%) claimed to have made calls or sent texts campaigning for candidates of their choice. Our interviewees also claimed to have received text messages which, as usual, were read to them by friends and relatives. They did not remember receiving any calls from politicians or their agents.

Most (88.9%) of our respondents received political messages from governorship aspirants or their agents; 33.0% from local government level contestants; 19.9% from presidential aspirants. State-level legislative aspirants (12.0%) and federal-level representatives (8.4%) also sent text messages.

We sought to know what the content of communication was when users deployed their phones for campaign purposes. Table 2 summarises the findings.

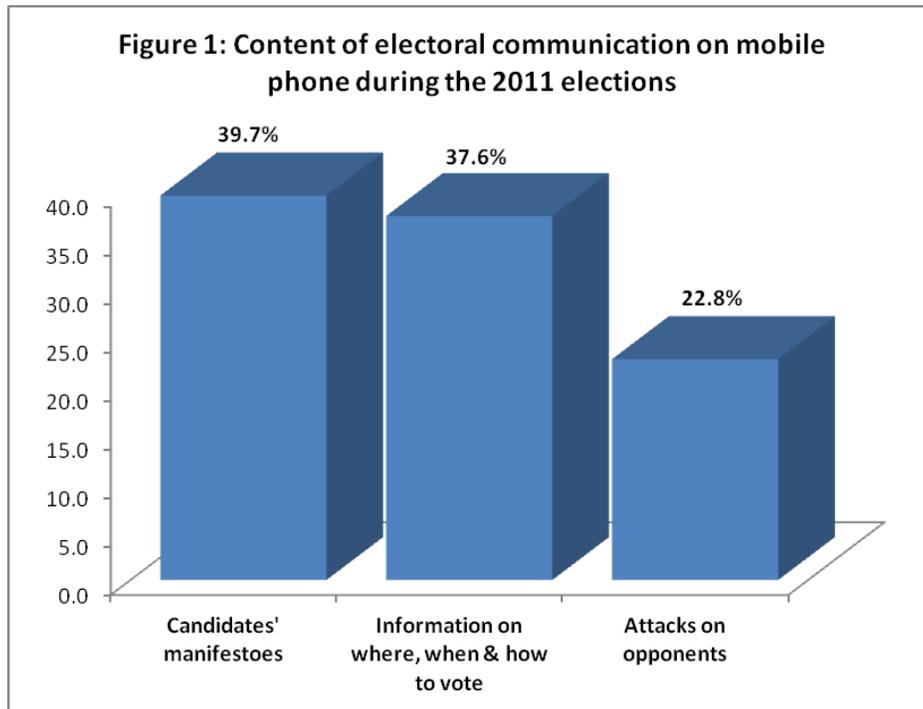
Table 2: Contents of electoral communication by mobile phones during the 2011 elections

	Information on where, when and how to vote	Attack on opponent(s)	Contestant's manifesto	Total
Text messages received	27.8%	28.7%	43.5%	100% (n=115)
Calls received	40.5%	21.6%	37.8%	100% (n=37)
Text messages sent	48.5%	21.6%	37.8%	100% (n=33)
Calls made	50.0%	15.4%	34.6%	100% (n=52)

Text messages were the most often used function of the mobile phone by campaigners or electoral educators. Many respondents made calls to campaign or educate fellow voters. Few received campaign calls.

Information on where, when and how to vote slightly dominated the content of calls received or made, as well as the content of text messages sent. However, it was the least with reference to the content of text messages received.

Working with raw scores, we computed the total of communications exchanged on mobile phone as shown by respondents. Figure 1 shows that slightly more of the exchanges focused on the manifestoes of candidates than on voter education; attacks on opponents were the fewest exchanges.



The trend shown was however modified when we analysed the content of text messages volunteered by respondents. We asked respondents who had not deleted the text messages they received during the elections to give us such messages. We got 43 such messages. Our analysis shows that, contrary to what the Figure 1 suggests, many (23) of the text messages were attacks on the opponents.

While some of the texts simply educated voters ("vote for the party with good manifestoes, vote for the party for good leader. Do not vote for money. Your vote is your power"), some others directly advertised a candidate or party such as this:

Vote 4 Action: Lagos has roads, water, jobs, teachers are paid well, schools open. ACN is working. O to ge!³ Vote men of vision, not thug-vote the broom. Vote Ribadu+Adeola (Sent by Change Vanguard)

Lagos State, at this point, had been ruled by the opposition since 1999 and it seemed to have experienced good governance. The text appealed to voters to support the party's bid to rule the entire country for that will be in their interest. It did not omit to cast aspersion on the party ruling at the centre as a party of thugs and men without vision.

Godfathersim, the act by which an influential politician imposes his candidate on his party and uses all means, including violence to get him elected, is a major problem in Nigeria. Four of the texts dealt with this. An example is presented here:

Tinubu imposed his wife, his son-in-law and his boys on Lagosians. We must not allow Tinubu to turn us to animals in his Animal Farm. Vote for true change; vote Labour Party for State Assembly, Lagos.

The sender did not ask that the governor of Lagos, imposed by Mr. Tinubu, be voted out: the governor had performed creditably and ousting him would be both impossible and unpopular. Rather, she or he asked that members of the State House of Assembly, also allegedly being imposed by Tinubu, should not be voted.

There were also texts that alleged plans by opponents to cause instability and rig elections ("the desperate acts of a cabal of failed politicians via acts of arson ... assassination attempts...campaigns of calumny...") and thus asked people to rise up against these politicians and vote them out.

Some texts simply caused confusion by giving false information about the opponent:

Sen. George Akume came from a meeting early today n announced his withdrawal from the senatorial election citing violence and threat to peace 4 his actions. He has urged his supporters to be calm & will address his supporters shortly. (Sent by Tarka Alert, Zone B)

The senator, however, claimed that he did not make any such decisions or announcements.

Yet some refuted claims made by opponents and reassured their supporters:

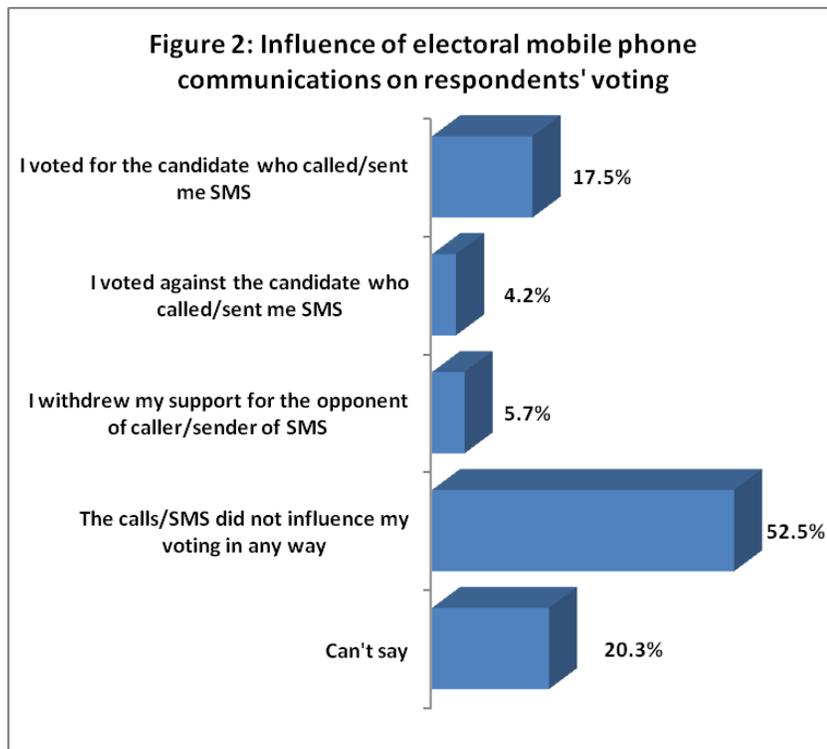
³ Yoruba expression meaning: it's enough!

Do not be distracted by propaganda, treats [sic] & destructive intentions. VICTORY IS SURE. Be the change. VOTE ACN (Sent by Change)

It is intriguing that respondents who claimed to have received voter-education and manifesto text messages were many but when asked to volunteer the texts they received, most of the texts volunteered were those attacking the opponents.

We turned to the question of the influence of the text messages on voters. Did our respondents vote for those who called or sent them text messages on the basis of that communication?

Generally, 30.7% of our questionnaire respondents thought that the mobile phone was an effective campaign tool while 48.6% said it was somewhat effective. Some of the respondents who embarked on campaigns for candidates (38.7%) claimed that their candidates won the election. We got more specific as we explored this further by asking respondents to indicate if they took any actions solely as a result of the mobile phone communications during the elections. As shown in Figure 2, majority claimed that the electoral communications on mobile phone did not have any influence on their voting decision.



The rather minimal influence of mobile phone communication in the electoral process is obvious here. Only 27.3% of the respondents took any action as a result of the mobile phone communication in the electoral process. To 73.7%, either the text had no effect or they could not say if it had any effect.

We explored this further with our interviewees, all of whom also claimed that the texts or calls did not influence their voting decision. Source credibility, source track record and firm resolve for change emerged as the reasons that interviewees did not accept the messages.

We did not trust these people sending texts. We know they have been paid. They have collected money to send those texts. So, it is not the interest of the people which was making them to send the texts. So, when they (my literate relatives/friends) told me it is from PDP, I said delete it. They are selfish.

Another interviewee emphasised the resolve for change in the composition of those who held power and benefited from it:

For four years, PDP has been eating. They should leave and let other people also come and eat... when they said 'this is another text from PDP' I got angry. That's why we voted for ACN.

It is instructive to note that this interviewee was not interested in change that would bring better governance. It was not change so that things could get better, corruption would reduce and accountability with public funds would increase. Rather it was change for its sake, replacement of one group of 'eaters' with another. The interviewee did not have the hope of a true change in the electoral system. He did not trust those in power or those who aspiring to replace them.

We sum up this section by stating that electoral mobile phone communications during the 2011 elections served the purposes of informing citizens on a variety of topics but they did not convince voters to vote in certain ways or for certain people.

A momentary window for engagement

We sought to know if mobile phones in Nigeria served as a forum for ongoing engagement between office holders and the citizens especially after elections. For this to happen, citizens must have the phone numbers of their political representatives or of the assistants of such representatives. They should then be exchanging information regularly with such representatives or assistants. Table 3 shows that few people had the phone number of their representative, and even fewer had received a text message from politicians since the election held.

Table 3: Respondents who have the phone number of elected representatives

Representative	% who have his/her phone number
Councillor	9.4
Chairman of local government	7.3
State Assembly Representative	13.6
Federal Assembly Representative	5.8
Governor	4.2
President	3.7

Those who had the possibility of contacting representatives after the elections were very few. Surprisingly, the closest tier of government to citizens, the local government did not have the highest number of citizens who knew the phone numbers of officials or of their assistants. We attempted to compare contact and engagement between citizens and political office holders during and after elections. We found a rather sharp drop in that engagement once the elections were over. Table 4 compared the number of respondents who got text messages from aspirants during the elections with those who got messages from them after the elections.

Table 4: Comparison of respondents who got SMS from politicians during campaigns and those who got after

Representative	% who received SMS during campaigns from him/her	% who have received SMS from him/her since after election
Councillor and local government chairman	33.0	5.2
State Assembly Representative	12.0	0.4
Federal Assembly Representative	8.4	0.1
Governor	88.9	3.1
President	19.9	0.6

The number of respondents who got a text message from any political office holder since after the elections was far lower than those who got the text messages during the elections. This may be because after the elections, winners get too busy trying to serve while losers get busy trying to find means of defraying the cost of the election, among other engagements.

Many (31.1%) of our respondents however thought that politicians deliberately cut off contact with citizens after elections are over. This they do by changing their phone lines once election is over. Only few (11.6%) claimed

to have been able to speak on phone with elected politicians since after the elections. Some (14.9) made calls but the calls were not answered.

Our interviewees shed further light on the disconnection between politicians and citizens that often follows elections. One of them expressed his frustration at his inability to reach his local government chairman after the elections this way:

Even this one who lived with us here, across the road, I asked my children to call him for me. They said it did not connect. I said 'Send him text for me'. They said the number was refusing text. You see? But that was the number he used to call us day and night, and to send us texts before the elections.

We asked to see the text message and the number. The text was actually sent by an internet-supported bulk-SMS application which does not accept calls or replies to SMS. While this explains the inability of our interviewee to send SMS, it does not explain why the politician's phone number does not work.

Another interviewee painted the situation rather bleakly as he pointed out the exploitative cycle which citizen-politician relationship has turned to:

Why should they search for us? What they wanted to get from us, they have got it, and we are no longer useful to them. After four years, they will come back and meet us, give some people small money, give us lots of promise, and then after we have voted they disappear. It is the way of politicians.

The hopelessness palpable in this quote was not peculiar to the interviewee. Others pointed out that this "way of politicians" cut across political parties and ethnicity.

The mobile phone has not removed the communication gap between citizens and their political leaders. In times of elections, the communication gap is narrowed. The mobile phone at that time becomes a window for engagement. But this window is only momentarily open. It is again shut once the elections are over.

Weakly exploited for citizen mobilisation

This last section of our investigation sought to know how well citizens deployed their mobile phone for mobilising other citizens against undemocratic forces. The survival of democracy depends on, among others, a vigilant citizenry whose voice is heard each time democracy is under threat. In Nigeria, opportunities for this include discussing the progress of democracy through the conventional mass media, and directly mobilising other citizens to protest or

discuss government's decisions. Responses given by our respondents show that few had used the mobile phone to participate in democracy discussions on radio or television, or to alert a newspaper reporter about a democracy-related event.

Table 5: Citizens' pro-democracy vigilance through mobile phone in the last one year

Activity	3 or more times (%)	Once or twice (%)	Never (%)	No response (%)	Total
Contribute to political discussion on radio	7.6	9.9	82.0	0.5	100
Contribute to political discussion on television	5.5	5.5	89.0	0	100
Alert newspaper house about event connected to democracy	5.5	3.4	91.1	0	100
Mobilise citizens against a government decision	6.2	6.1	87.7	0	100
Mobilise citizens in support of a government decision	6.3	10.6	83.1	0	100
Discuss politics on social media	22.1	11.0	66.9	0	100

(n=191)

The percentage of those who had not engaged their phone in the discussion of democracy or in mobilising citizens against threat to democracy was the highest for each of the activities listed. It is instructive that about 33% had discussed politics on social media using their mobile phone device at least once in the last one year. Discussing politics through mobile phone was not an activity that most respondents engaged in. We asked further and found that only 25.1% deployed their mobile phones to mobilise citizens against government withdrawal of subsidy on petroleum products. That decision had led to widespread protests in some parts of the country in early 2012, and mobile phones and social media were allegedly used to organise the riots.

We sought to know why respondents did not carry out these vigilance activities through their mobile phone. Time (98.5%); money for call credits (97.9), and fear of being attacked by politicians or their thugs (93.3%) were the reasons given for not deploying mobile phones for pro-democracy vigilance.

Interview responses largely confirmed the sparse use of mobile phone for pro-democracy vigilance. Interviewees added more reasons: the government was known for not taking criticisms and suggestions from citizens seriously, and many citizens are apathetic and would not be mobilised.

Discussion

The first concern of our findings refers to the penetration of the mobile phone in Nigeria. Much of the discussion and celebration of the growth of mobile telephony in Africa has focused on horizontal growth, that is, numerical growth in ownership of mobile phones. Attention on how much a phone owner is able to accomplish through phone has been taken for granted. Our study calls attention to the need to go beyond ownership deep down vertically by focusing on individual users. Many of our respondents own phones but they greatly underutilise them. James and Versteeg (2007) make similar observation highlighting the disparity between phone ownership and phone use. Just as there are phone users who do not own phones, so are there phone owners who use them occasionally or not at all.

Our findings lead us to query the acclaimed all-leveller power of the mobile phone. The mobile phone is said to have obliterated or significantly reduced the gap between the rich and the poor, and the literate and the non-literate, in terms of access to information (Bailard, 2010; Ledgard, 2011). Non-literate users are severely limited by their illiteracy to only the rudimentary uses of the phone. The mobile phone has only strengthened the existing power imbalance by making the non-literate depend on the literate for most of the tasks of mobile telephony such as adding contacts, loading credit, checking credit balance, text messaging, e-banking among others. The poor, even if literate, are also heavily disadvantaged. They cannot afford the kind of phone that can provide internet services, or pay for the internet services on such phones. To the extent that political communication takes place in the cyber world, the poor and illiterate remain disenfranchised. In Nigeria, this category of citizens is in the majority.

The second concern of our inquiry is about the use of the mobile phone for electoral purposes. Notwithstanding the foregoing precautions, we affirm the widespread use of mobile phone in the electoral process in Nigeria. Through text messages and calls, citizens are informed of voting schedules and the manifestoes of some candidates. They are persuaded to vote for particular candidates and not to vote for others. But the mobile phone also permits rumours and damaging campaigns about opponents.

Therefore, we question the metaphor of 'transformation' typically used to describe the impact of mobile telephony (Bailard, 2010; Ledgard, 2011). Such metaphors as 'transformation' 'revolution' 'reconfiguration' have in them the denotations of totality, complete newness and suddenness therefore setting certain expectations regarding the consequences of mobile communication. Taking apart the metaphor of revolution, Stephens (1998) points out the tendency to exaggerate the positive or negative impact of very new form of communication from the discovery of the pencil to the internet. From our findings, we would say that the mobile phone has not transformed politics or

elections in any revolutionary way. It rather has provided a faster way and wider way of doing old politics. In a sense, and with reference to contents of campaign communications, the way is even dirtier, littered with extremely brash invectives that were not allowed in the traditional media.

The impact of mobile telephony on voting decision was minimal. "Mobile phone is not the silver bullet" (Griffin *et al.*, 2006: 63). Olorunnisola & Martin (2012) caution against 'hyperbolic inferences' on the impact of new media directing attention to contextual and other factors that 'minimize hyperbolic assumptions' about impacts. One of such factors, our study shows, is the problem of basic conventional literacy. Other important factors that created a gap between information and action in the electoral process include politicians' track record of deceit. An atmosphere of distrust and perpetual doubt pervades the relationship between politicians and the citizens in Nigeria and using mobile phone for political purposes has not changed that situation.

Our third concern was the extent to which the mobile phone has become a tool for ongoing conversation between citizens and politicians for this is a major input to the health of a democracy. The communication gap between politicians and citizens persists. During electoral campaigns, politicians make efforts to bridge the gap using all available means including the mobile phone, and then "burn the bridge" once the elections are over. Citizens have few ways, if any, of engaging politicians and holding them accountable even with the widespread presence of the mobile phone. The mobile phone, unlike the wired telephone, makes disconnection from the citizenry easy for politicians because SIM cards are easy to obtain and discard, incoming calls can be barred, and internet-enabled bulk SMS service, which allows only one-way communication, is both cheap and readily available. Ojebode *et al.* (2011) and Ojebode (2012) have observed that nearly all the strengths of the mobile phone can become weaknesses.

Our last concern was to ask: what happens to citizen engagement and pro-democracy vigilance in the era of mobile technology? With the pride of place given to mobile communication and the internet in the recent uprisings in the Arab world, the alleged widespread use of Facebook and BB during the recent fuel crisis in Nigeria, one is tempted to go along with popular comments and interpretations. More nuanced and cybersceptic analyses have however suggested that the contributions of new media to Arab Spring was at best moderate (Barkawi, 2011; Olorunnisola and Martin, 2012). Our findings suggest that few citizens attempt to mobilise other citizens or join others to discuss the progress of democracy and address threats to democracy. Despite the relative safety afforded the user by the nature of the mobile phone, most citizens still express the fear that they might be attacked if they anger some politicians by their comments. New media have not removed old fears.

How does the foregoing tally with the widespread 'mobile' activism among pro-democracy civil society groups during the 2011 elections? From all

indications, widespread election monitoring and reporting by civil society groups during the 2011 elections involved few Nigerians who were literate and had reason to serve as monitors and reporters. This is clearly worth the commendations, though it is left to be determined if these self-appointed volunteers were impartial observers or sponsored agents of politicians. The concerned civil society organisations had little or no way of finding out the truth. The implication of this is that all that took place might have been a mere semblance of citizen activism and engagement while in truth, it is fuelled by partisan interests.

Conclusion

That everyone exercises the right to self-expression does not mean that democracy is being deepened. Mobile phones are found even in the remotest parts of Nigeria and nearly everyone is talking. However, only a few are able to maximise the opportunities provided by mobile phones; the majority are hampered by illiteracy, poverty and fear. The coverage is far wider than it has ever been, but coverage does not collocate with depth. Neither does it necessarily come with impact.

Enhancing the contributions of mobile telephony to the democratic process in Nigeria will take empowering the citizenry with needed literacy and other skills. Pro-democracy civil society organisations and the traditional media should provide a safe forum for citizens to use mobile phone to comment on and critique government decisions and actions.

Investments in contextualised voice-activated applications will also help re-enfranchise the non-literate who form the bulk of the Nigerian population. Advances in this technology, popularised in Nigeria by the African Languages Technology Initiative (ALT-I), should be supported by mobile phone operators and donor agencies.

This is not to demean the contributions of mobile telephone to the democratic process in Nigeria. Citizens who use the mobile phone to participate actively in the political process may be few but the fact that such is taking place at all is significant. There is likelihood that the number and intensity will increase as literacy levels improve, and as citizens grow in the values they attach to democracy. Growth in values attached to democracy will increase when government performs and delivers in ways that convince citizens that democracy is capable of alleviating poverty, improving safety and addressing the myriad of personal and national problems which citizens confront.

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