Digital Media and the Promotion of Electoral Integrity in Nigeria: An Assessment of Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Internet, social media and mobile technologies have revolutionised political communication, voter participation, election observation and information sharing. Digital platforms have not only opened new possibilities to improve transparency, accountability, civic engagement, voter education, citizen journalism and real-time election observation, but they also pose new challenges for the credibility of elections. In light of the existing literature and recent electoral experiences in Nigeria, the paper examines how the use of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, political propaganda, artificial intelligence-generated deepfakes, cybersecurity, online harassment and the digital divide erode public confidence and electoral integrity. It looks at the opportunities and challenges digital media poses to electoral integrity in Nigeria in the country's changing demographic and democratic landscape. Conceptual and analytical approaches were used to examine the ambivalent nature of digital media as an enabler of citizens' participation in the democratic process and a catalyst for new vulnerabilities emerging within Nigeria's electoral space. Similarly, it contends that digital media can only support the democratic values of freedom, transparency and accountability of institutions, and the protection of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, when there is a proper balance between technological innovation, institutional transparency, effective regulation, platform accountability, cybersecurity and the protection of fundamental rights. The paper also highlights the importance of digital and media literacy, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and the proactive involvement of electoral management bodies, technology companies, civil society organisations, and policymakers in advancing electoral governance. It recommends that credible, transparent, inclusive and peaceful elections that support a sustainable democratic process depend on responsible governance of the digital information ecosystem in Nigeria.

Keywords: Digital media, Electoral integrity, Democracy, Misinformation, Artificial intelligence

Introduction

Digital communication technologies have greatly transformed the way democratic elections are conducted (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). Digital media have become vital to political communication, enabling political actors, electoral management bodies, civil society organisations, journalists and citizens to participate in political

processes in ways that were previously inconceivable (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015). Unlike traditional media, digital media enable real-time interaction, user-generated content, interactivity, and the global distribution of political content. Political communication, campaign mobilisation, voter education, issue advocacy and election monitoring have all become major areas of political engagement on social media platforms such as Facebook, X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp and Telegram. Digital media have therefore transformed the politics of elections in fundamental ways by providing greater opportunities for citizen engagement in politics and generating new challenges for democratic governance.

The digital space and electoral processes have become increasingly intertwined in Nigeria, especially with the growing presence of the internet, smartphones, and social media. This digital revolution has transformed the way political information is communicated to citizens, how citizens engage in online debates, how they question the government, and how they communicate directly with political candidates and public institutions. Whereas in times past electoral campaigns were primarily conducted through traditional media and personal contact, the modern approach involves advanced digital tactics such as geo-targeted social media advertising, live-streaming campaign events, media engagement with influencers, online fundraising, and data-driven voter outreach. In contemporary Nigeria, digital platforms have thus become an integral part of electioneering and democratic participation.

Digital media has also provided more opportunities to enhance electoral integrity as it gains influence. Electoral integrity is the degree to which elections are conducted in a way that is transparent, inclusive, accountable, fair, credible, and respectful of the rule of law throughout the electoral cycle. Digital technologies have improved citizens' access to electoral information, helped educate them about the election, strengthened communication between electoral management bodies and citizens, and helped track electoral violations in real time (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). Additionally, citizens can now capture and share information or evidence of incidents at polling stations through their smartphones, and more and more journalists, election observers, and civil society groups are using digital platforms to track and report on activities at polling stations and to confirm election results.

However, with all these opportunities, there are complex dangers to electoral integrity due to increased reliance on digital media. The tools that enable democracy have become a medium for misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, political manipulation, cyber harassment and coordinated propaganda campaigns.

During election periods, the spread of misinformation can misinform the public, reduce trust in electoral institutions, stir up political tensions and undermine trust in democratic processes (Akinyetun & Ebonine, 2023). The rise of AI has made the digital information landscape even more complex by creating convincing fake images, voice recordings, and videos that can deceive voters.

Digital political communication was evident in the recently conducted elections in Nigeria. For instance, digital media was used for youth engagement, participation, and election observation. The use of digital media for political mobilisation and public discourse, among other things, had not been experienced in the conduct of the previous general elections in Nigeria (Adewale et al., 2025). However, the recently conducted elections have brought into the open numerous issues, including misinformation, hate speech, ethnic and religious polarisation, online intimidation, and campaigns to alter perceptions. The developments highlight the need to critically examine the double-edged nature of digital communication as both a facilitator of democratic participation and an electorally vulnerable resource.

This paper critically analyses the opportunities and challenges of digital media in Nigeria's electoral process, adds to the scholarly and policy debates surrounding the strengthening of democratic governance in the digital age, and recommends a way forward for the effective promotion of credible, transparent, and inclusive elections. The paper argues that to ensure digital media are used to the best advantage for democratic purposes, a balance of effective regulation, strong digital and media literacy, platform accountability, institutional transparency, technological innovation, and respect for fundamental rights such as freedom of expression is needed.

Digital Media and Electoral Integrity

Digital media have transformed the creation, dissemination, and consumption of information and have a significant impact on political communication and democratic governance globally (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025). Digital media is a term used to describe internet-based communication platforms and tools that enable individuals to produce, share, access, and exchange information in real time via digital devices, including smartphones, computers, and tablets. Unlike traditional media, digital media support one-to-one communication as well as interactive, participatory communication, enabling users to create content, join conversations, and collaborate irrespective of distance. In the era of digital communication, social media such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Telegram, blogs, podcasts, and online news portals have emerged as key channels for political

actors, electoral institutions, journalists, civil society organisations, and citizens to communicate during election periods.

Digital media's defining characteristics, such as immediacy, accessibility, interactivity, convergence and user-generated content, have reshaped political participation, enabling citizens to engage directly with political processes (Boulianne, 2020). Political candidates and parties increasingly use digital platforms to share campaign information, engage supporters, raise funds, conduct opinion polls, and respond to emerging political questions. Similarly, electoral management bodies use digital technologies to disseminate election guidelines, voter education materials, polling information and election updates, improving communication with the electorate. These developments reflect the emergent status of digital media as strategic tools for democratic engagement and governance.

Electoral integrity, however, is the extent to which elections are conducted in compliance with internationally agreed democratic standards and national laws throughout the electoral cycle (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). It covers all aspects of transparency, accountability, inclusiveness, impartiality, fairness, credibility, political equality, and respect for the rule of law before, during and after elections. Electoral integrity is not limited to polling day. Still, it extends to voter registration, political campaign activities, access to the media, election administration, counting, declaration of results, dispute resolution, and post-election accountability. Better electoral integrity, fosters trust in democratic institutions, boosts political legitimacy, and helps foster peaceful political governance, while lower electoral integrity can lead to political instability, electoral violence, public distrust of democratic institutions, and political erosion.

Among the major issues affecting electoral integrity in Nigeria include the frequent accusations of electoral malpractice, vote buying, misinformation, electoral violence, and lack of confidence in election results. These issues have been further complicated by the advent of digital media. Although digital platforms make election information available and facilitate citizen journalism, election observation, and fact-checking, but they can equally be used to disseminate fake information, hate speech, coordinated political propaganda, and other forms of digital manipulation that can compromise the integrity of the electoral process. A clear grasp of the linkages between digital media and electoral integrity is thus vital to crafting policies and institutional arrangements to advance free, fair, credible and inclusive elections.

Opportunities Presented by Digital Media for Electoral Integrity

Electoral processes in democratic societies have been reshaped by the rapid development of digital media and the opportunities it has opened for political participation, transparency and accountability. Digital technologies have become essential tools for electoral management, political campaigns, civic engagement and election monitoring in Nigeria. As the use of digital platforms remains a subject of scholarly concern, it is also essential to acknowledge the massive democratic benefits of digital media for electoral integrity. Used positively, digital media contribute to strengthening democratic institutions, increasing citizens' empowerment, improving access to electoral information, and further enhancing the credibility of elections.

Improving voter education is one of the biggest strengths of digital media in ensuring electoral integrity. Electoral management bodies, civil society organisations, political parties and the media reach citizens through digital platforms to raise awareness of citizens on voter registration procedures, electoral guidelines, electoral laws and citizens' rights and responsibilities. Electoral information is easily shared via social media campaigns, videos, infographics, podcasts and live broadcasts. Greater political awareness among citizens allows them to make informed choices when voting, which helps increase voter turnout and improve democratic engagement (Thelma et al., 2024).

Barriers to participation in politics have declined significantly due to digital media, which give citizens a platform to engage in political discussion, interact with political candidates, express opinions, and participate in civic discourse (Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017). Digital platforms foster two-way communication, allowing citizens to ask public officials questions, seek clarification, and participate in policy decisions, whereas traditional media do not. By embedding the election process in a participatory culture, this environment helps to build a democratic culture by making voting a process rather than simply a periodic event.

With the increase in smartphone use, common people have become active observers of elections. Election activities can be recorded in photos, videos, and live streams during the process as evidence of electoral malpractice or compliance. Citizen-generated reporting supplements the work of domestic and international election observers, helps stamp out electoral misconduct, and promotes transparency (Oliveira & Garcia, 2019). Digital platforms also help journalists deliver real-time updates, confirm incidents and share election results, further bolstering public trust in the electoral process.

Electoral information is easily accessible to the public through digital media, which helps improve transparency. Electoral management bodies may post the voter register, election guidelines, polling unit locations and official results on their websites to limit opportunities for manipulation and increase institutional credibility. Citizens can also easily check on campaign promises, political activities, and policy decisions by political officeholders and candidates, which means that they are held to a higher standard of public accountability (Tedesco, 2004). This greater visibility makes people more accountable and fosters democratic governance.

Digital media has also helped independent fact-checkers to champion the verification of political claims and the fight against misinformation. These groups monitor statements made during campaigns, viral social media posts, and election-related rumours, and offer evidence-based corrections to these narratives to help citizens sort fact from fiction. Fact-checking enhances electoral integrity by supporting informed decision-making and minimising the effects of deceptive political communication (Judge & Korhani, 2020).

Youths in Nigeria are considered as democratic assets, and they are the majority users of digital media. They use digital platforms to mobilise people, educate and inform them, coordinate volunteer groups, and observe conduct of elections. Online campaigns promote youth engagement in voter registration, election observation, advocacy and peaceful political engagement. Digital media promote the sustainability and inclusiveness of electoral governance by engaging young people in democratic processes.

Digital media can help hold democratic leaders accountable by allowing citizens to monitor them constantly. Public officials remain accountable to the public, as voters assess their campaign promises, policy outcomes, and governance practices on digital platforms. This ongoing interaction fosters transparency, responsiveness, and responsible leadership, which helps to build electoral integrity beyond the electoral process.

Challenges Facing Electoral Integrity in the Digital Age

While digital media is believed to some democratic advantages, they also pose some serious challenges that could threaten electoral integrity. All the technologies that help people participate in politics can be used to influence public opinion, disseminate false information, deepen political polarisation and undermine people's trust in democratic institutions. The situation has worsened in Nigeria, where digital platforms are integral during election campaigns and voting periods.

Perhaps the most serious challenge is the widespread dissemination of misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation involves the unintentional sharing of false information, whereas disinformation refers to deliberately fabricated or manipulated content intended to deceive the public (Praveenkumar, 2024). During election periods, false reports regarding candidates, political parties, election results, or voting procedures can spread rapidly across social media, influencing voter perceptions and undermining confidence in the electoral process.

Digital platforms have also become channels for hate speech, inflammatory rhetoric, and ethnic or religious incitement. Politically motivated actors may exploit social media to promote divisive narratives that deepen societal tensions and encourage hostility among supporters of different political parties. Such communication threatens peaceful elections and may contribute to electoral violence before, during, or after voting.

Recent advances in artificial intelligence have introduced new risks to electoral integrity through the creation of highly realistic synthetic images, audio recordings, and videos commonly referred to as deepfakes. These manipulated materials can falsely portray political candidates making statements or engaging in actions that never occurred, thereby misleading voters and damaging public trust. As AI technologies become increasingly accessible, detecting manipulated political content presents a growing challenge for electoral stakeholders.

Digital media have become powerful instruments for political propaganda. Political actors may use coordinated online campaigns, sponsored content, and emotionally charged narratives to shape public opinion while suppressing alternative viewpoints. The use of fake accounts, coordinated influence operations, and automated bots further amplifies misleading political messages, creating an artificial impression of widespread public support or opposition.

Election-related digital infrastructure faces increasing cybersecurity risks, including hacking attempts, phishing attacks, identity theft, and unauthorised access to sensitive electoral information. Cyberattacks targeting electoral management bodies, political parties, or media organisations may disrupt election administration, compromise confidential data, or undermine public confidence in election outcomes.

Despite increasing internet penetration, unequal access to digital technologies remains a significant challenge in Nigeria. Rural communities, economically disadvantaged populations, women, older citizens, and individuals with limited

digital literacy may experience reduced access to online political information and civic engagement opportunities. This digital divide may inadvertently exclude certain groups from fully participating in democratic processes, thereby undermining the principle of electoral inclusiveness.

Nigeria continues to face challenges in developing effective regulatory frameworks that address harmful digital practices while protecting constitutional rights, such as freedom of expression. Excessively restrictive regulations risk suppressing legitimate political discourse, whereas weak enforcement allows misinformation, online abuse, and coordinated manipulation to flourish. Achieving an appropriate regulatory balance remains one of the most difficult policy challenges in digital electoral governance.

Candidates, journalists, election observers, activists, and ordinary citizens increasingly face online harassment, cyberbullying, threats, and intimidation during election campaigns. Such hostile digital environments discourage political participation, particularly among women and marginalised groups, thereby weakening democratic inclusiveness and civic engagement.

The cumulative effect of misinformation, manipulation, hate speech, cyber threats, and political polarisation contributes to a decline in public trust in electoral institutions and democratic processes. When citizens cannot distinguish authentic information from fabricated content, confidence in election results diminishes, increasing the likelihood of post-election disputes and political instability.

Critical Discussion

Based on the discussion above, digital media have become an integral part of Nigeria's electoral system, changing the nature of political communication, civic engagement, and electoral governance. But their impact on the integrity of the electoral process is a paradox nonetheless. Digital platforms have helped to increase participation in and transparency in the democratic process, but have also given rise to new vulnerabilities that can threaten the credibility of the electoral process. The question Nigeria faces is not whether digital media should be used in elections, but how to use them to enhance the democratic potential of these media while reducing the risks.

The democratisation of political communication is one of the biggest opportunities afforded by digital media. Digital platforms can provide opportunities for citizens, political parties, the media, civil society organisations, and electoral management bodies to communicate directly with one another, without the need for institutional

gatekeepers such as traditional media. This has led to greater public involvement, improved voter education, greater access to election observation, and greater political accountability. Digital media have also enabled the marginalised, including women, people with disabilities, and young people, to engage in politics and be involved in civic life. The developments continue to uphold the principles of inclusiveness and transparency, which are basic to electoral integrity.

However, the democratic gains are being challenged by digital technology in many ways. Misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, coordinated propaganda and AI-generated fake information have made the digital information landscape more complex. In the run-up to elections, false narratives can have a tangible impact on elections, worsen polarisation, undermine trust in elections and, in severe instances, lead to violence. As AI becomes more sophisticated, it can create realistic "deepfake" images that can mislead citizens and harm the reputations of political actors, exacerbating this concern. These developments signal that technological innovations can enhance democracy only if institutional protections accompany them.

One of the major controversies here is the rules and regulations governing digital media in elections. Governments have a role to play in safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process, but excessive regulation could infringe on freedom of expression, press freedom, and citizens' access to information. In contrast, an unregulated digital space can lead to the spread of harmful content, with little accountability. The right policy answer is, consequently, not either/or but "both/and"—balancing democratic freedoms with responsible governance. This should be transparent, accountable, proportional, under judicial oversight, and respectful of constitutional rights.

There is a heavy burden on tech firms to protect electoral integrity as well. Social media platforms are key influencers of political information, and their algorithms are increasingly determining public discourse. As a result, these companies should enhance their content-moderation systems, increase transparency in political advertising, recognise coordinated inauthentic activity, reduce the dissemination of demonstrably false information about elections, and engage with independent fact-checking organisations. Meanwhile, content moderation should be transparent, consistent and subject to independent oversight to prevent arbitrary censorship or political bias.

Election management bodies also play a significant role in fostering good digital communication, especially the Independent National Electoral Commission

(INEC). INEC should further strengthen its digital communication efforts by ensuring that timely, accurate and accessible election information is made available on verified digital channels beyond election organisation. Timely dissemination of official information helps to limit the space for misinformation to grow and boosts trust in electoral administration. Stronger partnerships between INEC, security service providers, civil society, the academy and tech firms will further support coordinated action against new electronic threats.

Perhaps the most long-lasting solutions to safeguard electoral integrity are digital and media literacy. They have the ability to assess online information, check its sources, and distinguish between reliable and fake news, which makes them less vulnerable to misinformation, manipulation, and political propaganda. The inclusion of digital literacy in educational programs and the establishment of public awareness campaigns throughout the country can help to enhance citizens' ability to resist digital manipulation and encourage responsible digital use.

Digital media should not be considered either a democracy's blessing or a democracy's bane. Rather, they are effective only within a particular institutional, regulatory, technological, and ethical context. The future of Nigeria's democracy will thus depend on its capacity to leverage digital innovation while mitigating the risks of misinformation, cyber insecurity, manipulation, and polarisation in the digital space. This is crucial to enhancing electoral integrity, holding electoral officials accountable, and ensuring that the public has confidence in how future elections will be conducted.

Conclusion

Digital media has completely redefined political communication, engagement and democratic participation in the conduct of elections. Digital technologies in Nigeria have opened new possibilities to strengthen electoral integrity by improving electoral education, expanding political participation and monitoring, making elections more transparent and accountable, and disseminating electoral information in real time. The developments have helped increase citizen information and engagement and enhance the capacity of citizens, journalists, civil society groups, and electoral management bodies to monitor electoral processes and hold decision-makers accountable to citizens.

But as the world of digital media grows, it faces threats to its democratic potential from the spread of misinformation and disinformation, hate speech, cyberattacks, political propaganda, algorithmic amplification, and new artificial intelligence technologies that shape public opinion. If not resolved, these issues can lead to

reduced trust in electoral structures, heightened polarisation, and diminished trust and legitimacy in elections. Therefore, ensuring electoral integrity in the digital age is not just about legal and institutional measures, but also about effective governance of the digital information ecosystem.

This paper has suggested that digital media is a two-sided phenomenon in Nigeria's electoral environment. Technologies are only part of the picture of their impact on electoral integrity; it is the way in which governments, electoral institutions, political actors, technology companies, civil society, the media, and citizens collectively use and control them that matters. Thus, a fair and responsible use of digital communication is needed to maintain democratic freedoms. Enhancing digital literacy, institutional transparency, platform accountability, cybersecurity, and collaboration among stakeholders will help Nigeria make the best use of the democratic potential of digital media and reduce the threats they pose. This is essential to ensure credible, peaceful, inclusive and transparent elections that contribute to sustainable, democratic political development.

Recommendations

To enhance the integrity of elections in Nigeria in the digital age, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Government, educational institutions, civil society organisations, and media organisations should ensure that digital and media literacy programmes are rolled out nationally to empower citizens to identify misinformation, verify information online, and participate in digital political communication responsibly.
2. INEC must keep building and expanding its existing verified digital communication platforms to disseminate accurate, transparent and timely election information while quickly rectifying false narratives and misinformation.
3. Nigeria should put in place a clear legal and policy framework on political advertising, the use of artificial intelligence to produce election-related content, misinformation, cybersecurity, and digital electoral campaign ethics that would ensure a proper balance between the constitutional rights to freedom of expression and access to information.
4. Social media platforms need to be better associated with electoral authorities, fact-checking institutions, researchers and civil society organisations to detect coordinated disinformation, increase transparency in political advertising and make it harder to access obviously false election-related information.

5. Government and development partners should support independent fact-checking efforts that deliver timely checks on political claims and election information without interfering with editorial independence.
6. Electoral management bodies need to allocate resources to enhance cybersecurity, establish regular risk assessments, and educate staff on safeguarding the digital infrastructure linked to elections from cyberattacks and unauthorised access.
7. Political parties, political candidates and political campaign organisations should voluntarily establish codes of conduct that discourage misinformation, hate speech, online harassment, and the use of fake technologies and artificial intelligence in election campaigns.
8. Sustainable electoral integrity is a shared responsibility that requires ongoing partnership and cooperation among government institutions, electoral management bodies, technology companies, traditional media, academia, civil society organisations, security agencies, and citizens to address emerging digital challenges and enhance democratic resilience.

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