

## **SOCIAL MEDIA AND ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN NIGERIA: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOAL 16, A PANACEA?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Social media has changed the way people interact, transact, share information and participate in political activities. Of course, the electoral process in Nigeria, as is in other parts of the world, has been remarkably impacted by the proliferation of social media. However, despite the enormous advantages it holds, social media has also proven to be a tool for inciting electoral violence through disinformation, misinformation, hate speech, and propaganda. Indeed, it is imperative to adopt an alternative framework in addressing the grave danger inherent in social media and the fomentation of electoral violence in Nigeria. It is on this premise that Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 which seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels is recommended. The paper adopts a descriptive approach and argues that peace is a requisite for health, well-being, and sustainable development while strong institutions are pivotal to the attainment of peace. Therefore, the promotion of peace, justice, inclusion, and strong institutions must be treated as society's latest tall order. Consequently, the paper recommends the establishment of an Electoral Peace Commission, Justice Commission, strengthening of electoral institutions, and the censorship of inciting words on social media platforms as plausible solutions to electoral violence as caused by social media in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Election, electoral violence, social media, sustainable development goals

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is an axiom that the proliferation of technology has continued to have an unending intrusion into virtually all aspects of human life and endeavor. This incursion has over the years spared no sphere of human interaction. Indeed, technology has become a

household phenomenon; it is ubiquitous. To be sure, various individuals have adopted technology in one form or another. While many have used to it further

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or expand their business transactions, others have used it to improve communication, engage in teaching and learning, and of course, to further political ambition and/or participation. Widespread technology has no doubt birthed social media which today, has become an indispensable part of the everyday lives of world inhabitants. Social media has in the past few years, garnered massive fellowship and subscriptions. According to Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016), the emergence of social media revolutionized human communication as social media remains an integral part of human existence in contemporary times. This is evidenced in the number of people—circa 800 million—who are ardent users of Facebook and over 200 million who are Twitter users. No doubt, social media is a fantastic tool for communicating with a large audience.

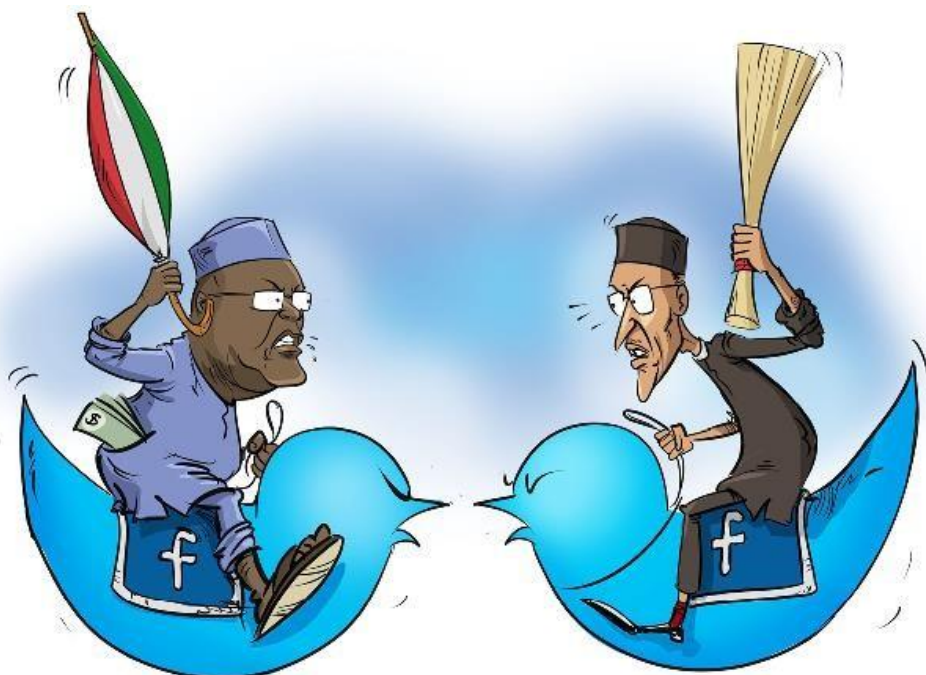
Social media has made the majority of its users, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural commentators; with everyone having his/her own opinion as well as a platform to air such opinion even without adequate knowledge of the topic. Opeibi (2019) aptly captures this view when he avers that, since the turn of this millennium, the internet and social media networks have been opening up new opportunities to energize political participation and civic engagement in advanced and emerging democracies. This new mode of virtual political interaction is creating a new ground for hastened engagements between politicians and citizens in most democratic cultures across the globe. They are particularly operational in encouraging more direct communication channels between politicians, the politically informed, and citizens whilst reducing communication lag.

Despite the overwhelming advantages of social media in improving communication, and of course, its relevance to the political stratosphere, it stands the risk of being manipulated towards achieving mischievous political gains. This is in part due to the lack of monitoring as well as uncontrollable influx. The huge information flowing on social media is generally unfettered, not quite censored, and often lacks genuineness. Ekwueme and Folarin (2017) note that politicians have actively and consciously shifted focus from the use of the old and the electronic media to the use of new media for electioneering purposes. The view of the authors is aptly depicted in the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria where the major contenders President Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party used social media as a major tool in their campaign. During the 2019 presidential campaign, social media platforms (such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter) were used to reach out to electorates on a massive scale.

Due to its faceless nature, social media is a breeding ground for disseminating unreliable information, fake news and for throwing banters. Social media can be used

to promote hate speech and incite violence. This was why Ekwueme and Folarin (2017) argue that despite the advantages social media holds in political sensitization and in raising awareness, it is also being used by political opponents as a tool for stirring conflict. Olabamiji (2014) adds that, although social media encourages political awareness and interaction, it is susceptible to intimidation. It can be used to taunt an opposition or provoke electoral violence.

**Figure 1:** Picture depicting President Muhammadu Buhari and Atiku Abubakar at war on Twitter and Facebook ahead of the 2019 General Elections



**Source:** Alade & Victoria (2018)

In light of the above, it is imperative to entrench a culture of peace because as Bayuni (2015) puts it, if media can launch a war, the converse must also be true. While they may not be able to discontinue the war they helped start or aggravate, media can undoubtedly create the needed environment to reinstate peace and order. Ojo (2015) asserts that the potential impact of the media in situations of political instability and conflict has long been acknowledged and is generally accepted, so there is already a great deal of agreement that the media can contribute to peace and compromise. It is then equally important to seek alternative means to curb electoral violence as may be caused by social media.

It is in response to this that the United Nation's new Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) – and specifically, Goal 16 – focuses on 'peace, justice, and strong institutions. Speaking on SDG 16, Ann Mische (the University of Notre Dame, n.d.) notes: *"If we truly want to be both "pro-poor" and "pro-planet" — goals that Pope Francis has argued are intrinsically interrelated — we need to understand the factors that contribute to more "just, peaceful and inclusive societies" via the building of "effective and accountable institutions at all levels."* As educators of the future leaders and

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*change agents, we have to address not only economic and security factors, but also the political, cultural and social dimensions of change efforts around the world” (p.1)*

The emphasis in the above quotation being ‘peaceful’, ‘inclusive societies’ and ‘security factors of change’, is a clear indication of the commitment of all member states of the United Nations to engendering peace and inclusive society where security dimensions of change are ensured. In other words, nations of the world under the aegis of the UN recognize the pertinent need for peace; without which an inclusive society where sustainable development goals can be attained is possible. It is therefore vital to explore alternative means for creating peace – as a panacea to electoral violence sparked by social media – through sustainable development goals.

It is on this basis that the paper appraises social media and electoral violence in Nigeria to ascertain the role of sustainable development goals in cushioning the effect and provide alternative frameworks.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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### Social Media

At first, clarification must be made on the novelty of the concept, that before Facebook, Twitter and Youtube became the face of social media, there have been quite many social media platforms. Fuchs (2014), argues that Blogs were already existing at the end of the 1990s. For instance, Wiki technology was suggested by Ward Cunningham in 1994 and released in 1995, while Google was founded in 1999. According to Ekwueme and Folarin (2017), platforms such as Classmates, Sixdegrees, and Ryze have been in existence before the 21st century which ushered in the revolution of new forms of internet-powered social media networks such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. According to Nenge (2019), the first attempt at Nigerian technologies was the Regional Informatics Networks for Africa (RINAF) project sponsored by UNESCO in 1995. The same year the Nigeria Internet Group was formed as a non-governmental organization, which aimed to promote Internet facilities throughout the country. In cooperation with other companies, the NIG held a workshop to increase the level of awareness on the benefits of the Internet for Nigeria. By 1996, the internet had reached when Nigeria Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) licensed 38 internet service providers (ISP). Linkservice Limited was the first ISP and started operation on January 1, 1997. The period between 1996 and 2000 recorded the entrance of ISPs such as Linkserve, Skannet, Hyperia, Steineng, PINET, Infoweb, Cyberspace, etc.

As Adegboye (2015) notes, by the early 2000s, Nigerians were able to easily establish connections with the outside world, in areas of business and academia, as well as on the social platforms of the era – Chat Rooms. The mid-2000s saw a marked increase in internet accessibility, which in turn sparked an enthusiastic uptake of networking

services such as Twitter and Facebook. By 2019, there were over 25 million active social media users in Nigeria while Facebook has over 16 million active daily users in Nigeria followed by Twitter which has over 1.6 daily users. Meanwhile, the number of social media users is projected to reach 44.63 million users by 2025 ([www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com)).

Surely, the influx of these social media platforms continually alters peoples' global, relational and interpersonal communication patterns. For emphasis, mobile phone penetration has sparked a plethora of ideas aimed at bridging the information dichotomy between the well-connected, less connected, and the disconnected. Here, the submission of Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) is relevant, that, internet-enabled communication has recurrently gained prominence in Africa generally and particularly in Nigeria. This is because both one-to-one and one-to-many communication has been enhanced by mobile phones and the internet. Social media usage has transcended merely connecting with friends and family, entertaining, or socializing. It is being effectively used to simplify and widen the scope of engagement in political dialogue, conversation, and banters.

Social media, according to Dijck (2013) is an interactive medium that advances from the one-sided communication of predominantly passive viewers to a two-sided communication of active listeners, readers, and participants. For Nnanyelugo and Nwafor (2013), social media are interactive media that allows users to share personal information, interact, and assumed the role of content creators. Social media is a platform used to improve social interactions and advance interests or goals. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and even Blogs are persuasive tools for spreading information, promoting freedom of speech, deepening democratic values, facilitating masses involvement in politics and governance as well enhancing brand mindfulness.

Social media are novel information networks where interpersonal relations are established and sustained. Sweetser and Laricsy (2008 as cited in Oyenuga, 2015) opine that as against what obtains in the use of television, radio, and newspapers, social media users and facilitators are rather active in the creation and interchange of information. The pivotal point in the definitions expounded above shows that social media is useful for instantaneous communication, and of course, it differs from the traditional media in that, users have the privilege of content conception. In essence, social media in addition to making its users content consumers, also makes them content producers. Social media enable individuals to broadcast their opinions, and activities without intrusion.



**Figure 2: Popular social media platforms**

**Source:** Wise (2016)

### Electoral violence

Onimisi and Omolegbe (2019) described electoral-related violence as threats of coercion, physical or bodily harm, and acts of coercion intended to obstruct or impede an electoral process in an electoral environment. These acts are carried out, it affects the electoral process – directly or indirectly, influences the election process – in a manner such as disruption of voting, and delay or overturning of the outcome of the elections. Electoral violence is a form of political violence demonstrated before, during, and after the election which may include politically induced ballot box snatching, killing, kidnapping, and armed attacks on perceived opponents, electoral stakeholders, and officers of the electoral umpire as well as burning of ballot boxes, collation centers, and offices to influence electoral outcome.

Electoral violence could also take the form of looting, assassination, arson, and attacks on those involved in the electoral process such as the voters, representatives, the media, destroying campaign rallies and electoral materials (Omotola, 2010; Onapajo, 2014). As Straus & Taylor (2009) argues, pre-election violence is often more vicious in Africa, while violence on the day of election always involve voter intimidation, ballot box snatching, manipulation of election results, and attacks on electoral officers while post-election violence comes in form of protest, burning of electoral materials and facilities, widespread violence, and unjustified killings.

According to Collier and Vicente (2008), electoral violence is a decisive strategy to effectively dissuade the opponents from exercising voting rights in a peaceful

atmosphere, thus keeping the other political party at an advantage. Albert (2007), sees electoral violence as psychological and physically structured actions targeted at intimidating a political opponent during the electoral process to influence the electoral outcome in favor of the perpetrator.

**Figure 3: Election polling units attacked by hired thugs in 2019**



**Source:** Damilare (2019)

### **Sustainable Development Goals**

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) stem from the undeniable need to eradicate poverty, combat inequalities, tackle climate change, and improve the well-being of human beings. Adopted in 2015, SDGs—which expand on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that expired in 2015—are a new, universal set of goals, targets, and indicators that UN member states are expected to use to frame their agendas and political policies till the year 2030. The SDGs proposed 17 goals to replace the eight focal points of the defunct MDGs (Ford, 2015). The 17 SDGs and 169 targets as officially adopted at a UN summit in New York in September 2015, and applicable from January 2016, make up the 2030 Agenda, which emphasizes that eradicating poverty in all its forms and proportions, including extreme dearth, is the greatest global challenge and a central prerequisite for sustainable development. In implementing the outline, countries set on to adopt the daring and transformative steps which are urgently needed to move the world onto a sustainable and irrepressible path (IISD, 2017). The SDGs stems from the criticism faced by the MDGs for being too narrow and neglecting causes of poverty, gender inequality, violence, and economic development. The SDGs are supposed to be more inclusive, sustainable, and “leave no one behind”.

The scope of the SDGs according to Ford (2015), includes:

- 1) End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- 2) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- 3) Ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages
- 4) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- 5) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- 6) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- 7) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
- 8) Promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all.
- 9) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation
- 10) Reduce inequality within and among countries
- 11) Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable
- 12) Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- 13) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- 14) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development
- 15) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification and halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss
- 16) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels
- 17) Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

A cursory look at the aforementioned goals shows that peace is germane to health and well-being while both the former and the latter are requisites of sustainable development. As such, a violent and disoriented society will no doubt make the realization of these goals unattainable. It is because of this that this paper now turns to assess how social media inflames electoral violence in Nigeria [or otherwise], to assess how sustainable development goals can be applied.

**Figure 4: Sustainable Development Goals**



**Source:** United Nations (n.d.)

### **Social Media, the Electoral Process and Electoral Violence in Nigeria**

Chinedu-Okeke & Obi (2016), opined that Barack Obama—in his 2008 and 2012 election campaigns—relied heavily on the use of online interfacing platforms to converse with the electorate and his supporters fondly referred to as ‘friends of Obama’. As Ezebuonyi & Ejezieh (2012) note, in adopting the same approach, President Goodluck Jonathan embraced an online information management strategy in his 2011 presidential election campaigns through his web page; [www.goodluckjonathanfor2011.com](http://www.goodluckjonathanfor2011.com), and subsequently declared his interest to vie for the number one office in the country. President Jonathan, obviously aware of the remarkable impact of social media, chose to build his electoral popularity around the digital interface.

This made Goodluck Jonathan the first Nigerian leader to use such a strategy thus engendering an improved electoral process with more informed electorates. This is because, the media, as a community, can avert and help to resolve the conflict by disseminating information, creating awareness and knowledge, promoting transparent, accountable, and participatory governance. It can also address perceived grievances by all sides in a conflict and create an environment that makes it possible for the parties to a conflict to opt for dialogue. The media not only contributes to peace and dialogue in these ways but often provides the platform where the necessary dialogue can occur. It is through media platforms that the exchange of views and articulation of grievances take place when face-to-face meetings are not possible or feasible. Asuni & Farris (2011) assert that although election results on social media may be unofficial and it may be difficult to say absolutely that social media reports the

true picture of what happens at the polls, it still helps to substantiate results announced by INEC, especially those disputed by opposition parties.

According to Dunu and Oraka (2004), the remarkable trend of social media has equipped the communication industry with unprecedented innovative positive changes. Nigeria, like other countries of the world, has also profited in terms of improved technology output, better resources, and quality output induced by the new media revolution. This media revolution seems to be attaining more grounds in the Nigerian political scenery. Thus, political public relations is today carried out online (Kur and Melladu, 2007). Social media technologies have debatably improved the political communication process and are revolutionarily undergoing a global sensation (Nwabueze and Ezebuonyi, 2012). For instance, “citizens of all ages, education levels and from most parts of the country used social media during the 2011 election process” (Asuni & Farris, 2011:14). Anyways, the upsurge in the subscription to social media and its use in the political process emphasizes the role of social media in the contemporary world. In Nigeria for instance, the distasteful dependence on godfatherism is gradually giving way to online strategic shaping of campaign messages and festering of propaganda by political parties to deliberately coerce Nigerian voters to support their candidates (Ezebuonyi and Ejezieh, 2012). Besides, the Arab Revolution was given credibility by social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Youtube.

According to Asuni & Farris (2011:11), “social media changed how information was disseminated in Nigeria...the accessibility, low cost, and possible anonymity of social media also meant that some were able to cross-group lines to interact with ‘others’ of different orientation.” Stating the role of social media in the electoral process, Ikem (2011), argues that social media is a useful political tool used to mobilize political support, rally political support, and induce political conversation. The point flowing from Ikem’s submission is that social media is indispensably relevant to the electoral process in Nigeria. For instance, social media can be used to host a thought-provoking debate about the programmes, ideology, and vision of political parties as well as to build an online and offline support base for their candidates. It is also useful in promoting remote and virtual political participation by streaming political rallies and broadcasting party conventions.

Ikem (2011) further observes that, although, the reliance of politicians on traditional media for political campaigns cannot be completely ignored, yet, social media is very instrumental in reaching a large number of people. The point being made by the author here is that in a rapidly changing world, it is difficult to bring about democratic change with obsolete tools. Today’s leaders must understand the role of technology in politics and society. That is, they must realize the use of social media in the area of governance and political development to intensify citizens’ involvement in the political process.

Nkala (2012), maintains that through the transmission of the internet, social media have been variously intricate in the reformation of political, economic, social, and

cultural relationships and societies all over the world. This according to Nwabueze and Ejezieh (2012), has been apparent in the prevalence of user-generated content and the ways it is used to enhance social networking. The dispersion of this development is already revolutionizing all aspects of human exertion and the political process is not left out. With the rise of social networking technologies, secluded actors with common aims progressively use online tools to connect, plan, share, discuss, orientate and organize. To buttress this assertion, it is imperative to mention the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook Group which has over 80,000 members and no leader, yet, acted in concert with the intent of reforming the oppressive offline political circle in Egypt.

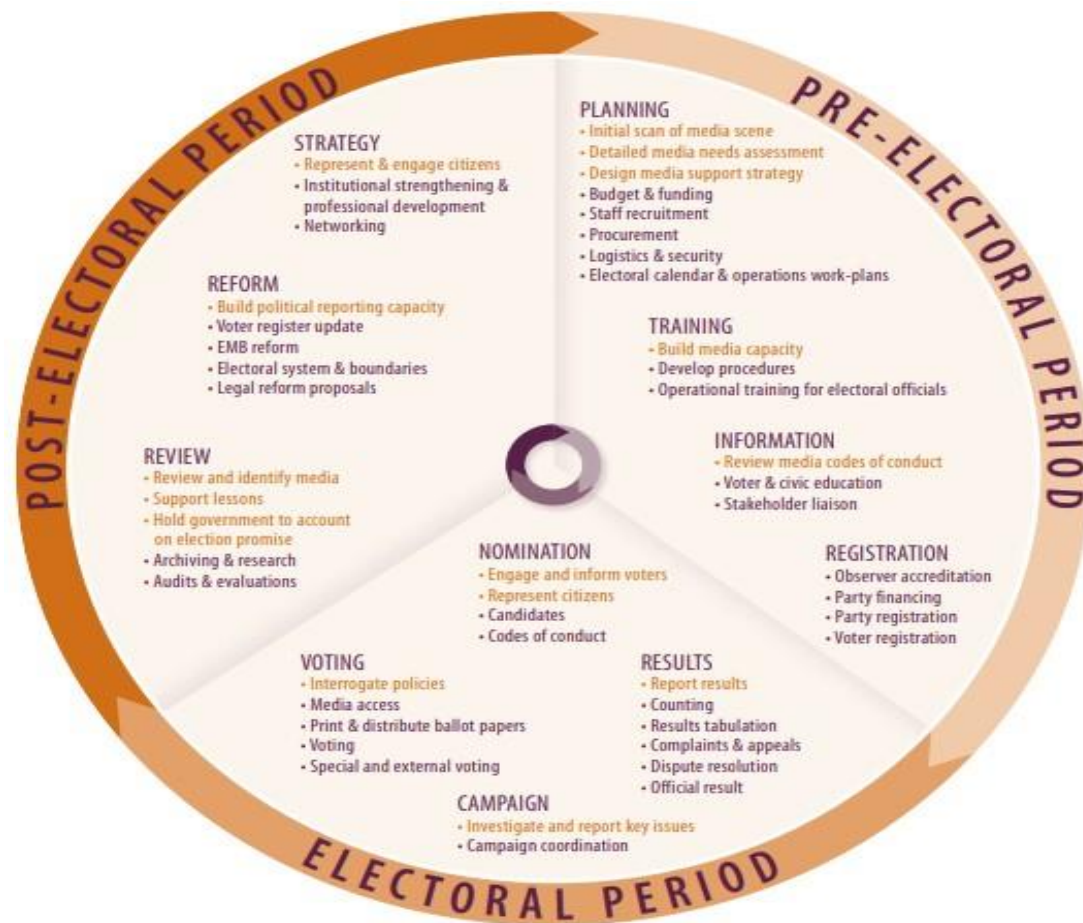
According to Akinyele & Taiyese (2019), the use of social media was quite noticeable in Nigeria's 2019 general elections. For instance, Channels TV created a "Poll Stream" to allow Nigerians in the diaspora to engage in the political dialogue in the country as well as to promote the involvement of those in the country. Twitter became a very relevant tool in providing election updates. Online news platforms such as Sahara Reporters, The Cable, and Premium Times were some of the most ardent users of this platform. Using their stations and social media platforms, live coverage of the polls and situation analysis was carried out by television stations like Nigerian Television Authority Silverbird, Channels, TVC News, and African Independent Television.

Meanwhile, newspaper companies such as BusinessDay, Punch, The Nation, Thisday, Daily Trust, Vanguard, and Guardian made use of their website, blogs, and social media to provide real-time updates on the electoral process. Various outlets also engaged their followers in the conversation using the hashtag method, such as #TheVerdict by Channels TV and #CivicDuty by Proshare. To facilitate ease of understanding, infographics, documentaries, and short stories were also used to analyze the results of the election by international media outlets like CNN, Al Jazeera, and BBC.

To be very sure, social media is useful throughout the electoral cycle beginning with the pre-election period, election period, and post-electoral period (see figure 5). Commenting on the role of social media in an electoral process, United Nations Development Programme (2014) says:

*"The media has a unique position as both a conveyor and a recipient of information. It has an essential watchdog function that increases the transparency and accountability of the process. Its messages can shape public opinion and set agendas. This makes the media a very influential actor and a powerful communications tool. A media that is responsible and appropriately used will help strengthen the democratic process and contribute to a more credible and inclusive election" (p. 1).*

**Figure 5: Social Media and the Electoral Cycle**



**Source:** UNDP (2014)

Despite the recognizable advantages of social media to the electoral process around the globe; Nigeria inclusive, it is worthy to note that social media has also contributed in no small measure to electoral violence. As Peter & AbdulRahman (2018) notes, social media platforms are punctured with and changelessly promote hate speeches. This Weaver (2019) alludes to that, the proliferation of political discussions and public debate through the use of social media, also brought with it, election-related violence. This is because social media allows for the perpetration of psychological violence, derogatory statements, discriminatory taunting, nonconsensual abuse of privacy, as well as direct and indirect threats of violence. Meanwhile, Fafchamps & Vicente (2014), state that violent intimidation, threats of violence, and cyber threats have negative effects on voter turnout, electoral participation, and the electoral process.

Bradshaw & Howard (2018) notes:

*“The number of countries where formally organized social media manipulation occurs has greatly increased, from 28 to 48 countries*

*globally. The majority of growth comes from political parties that spread disinformation and junk news around election periods. More political parties are learning from the strategies deployed during Brexit and the US 2016 Presidential election: more campaigns are using bots, junk news, and disinformation to polarize and manipulate voters” (p. 3).*

According to Peter & Adeniyi (2017), hate speech is very well associated with social media in Nigeria. Hate speech is any statement or expression that has a predilection to foment harm on a person’s—or a group of people’s—image, persona, or belief system. This is increasingly becoming a threat in Nigeria. People, without reservations, can make unfounded claims, unguarded allegations, and unsupported comments which in most cases spread like wildfire thereby inducing violent conflict. Gagliardone et al. (2015) note that it is practically difficult to distinguish between truth and fiction, considering the level of untrue statements making waves on the internet; specifically on social media. This, Peter & AbdulRahman (2018) claim is a result of the lack of censorship of social media in Nigeria.

According to Isola & Mohan (2018), characterized by a ‘winner-takes-all mentality and the desire for political power, elections in Nigeria have become intractable and conflictual, so much so that elections have become war grounds to settle political scores. Political parties and their supporters have used elections to express their frustration; both using physical and online means. This, no doubt, betrays the essence of social media.

The above statement can be best understood when one considers the view of the United Nations Development Programme (2014) which states that:

*“The media has a very influential role in the conduct of elections and its outcome. In addition to providing information to the voters needed for them to make an informed choice and providing a platform for candidates to reach the public, the media can set the agenda for the process through the topics it covers, questions it asks, and tone of its coverage. Also, many electoral campaigns are often won or lost in the media through the way the candidate or issue is portrayed and the volume of increasingly expensive political advertisements. Because of its power to influence and inform, the media is expected to play an informed, watchdog role and keep citizens up to date on electoral issues, on the positions of candidates, and the how and whys of voting. It should serve as an impartial and open forum for public debate and discussion and provide candidates and parties with an equitable podium for their campaigns” (p. 11).*

The above possibilities regardless, the reality in Nigeria points in the opposite direction as social media is consistently being used to promote violence. This is corroborated by Isola & Mohan (2018) who aver that since 2011 when social media has played an increased and decisive role in Nigeria's elections, the use of derogatory words has also seen an upsurge and has become a basis for mobilizing supporters and inciting violence. Social media which boasts of its ability to reach a large audience has proven to be more dangerous than traditional means of campaigning. As the duo further claims, hate speech (or hate spin) as frequently used on social media, poses a grave challenge to the electoral process in Nigeria and makes peacebuilding more arduous than necessary. This is because efforts towards mediation and reconciliation post-election are often very difficult. Suntai & Targema (2017) submits that during the 2015 electoral process, social media platforms were used to promote smear campaigns and denigration of opposition characters, threatening to tear the country apart along Christian-south and Muslim North divide. As such, electoral violence, agitations and conflicts have transcended the traditional verbal method and taken to social media thus involving people of different ages, classes, and locations. Social media is now being courted for indorsing misinformation and the discrediting of an opposition. Put in a different way, social media could be used to promote free, fair, and credible elections, yet, it could be used for endorsing propaganda and manipulation of the electoral process.

Apuke & Tunca (2018) also note that social media is susceptible to inappropriate use by political parties, the aspirants, and their supporters thereby turning political campaigns and crusades into deadly exercises wherein mutual violence is assured due to misleading and image laundering information being spread on the platform. The point being reiterated here is that social media due to its lack of regulation and scrutiny is a potent tool for character assassination, hate speech, and abuse, all of which are precursors to electoral violence in Nigeria. Social media could be a compelling avenue for promoting bullying, verbal assault, lies, falsehood, calumny, and violence.

As Asuni & Farris (2011:16) argues, social media has been fingered as playing an undeniable role in post-election violence in Nigeria. This was buttressed by citing a message that circulated on social media after the Presidential elections in 2011 which reads: "As a consequence of the unrest in Kaduna and Zaria, Governor Yakowa has imposed a 24 hr curfew on Kaduna and Zaria while he refused to impose same in Kagoro, Kwoi, Zango and Kafanchan, Zonkwa, M/rido, and Gonin Gora; thereby allowing his Christian brothers to kill Muslims as they please. This is a clear danger of voting Yakowa as Governor." More of such messages branded social media and may have been responsible for the death of circa 400 Muslims in the southern part of Kaduna.

According to Egbunike (2019), the trend of inciting electoral violence through social media, rather than abate in Nigeria, remains recurring. In the build-up to the 2019 elections, misinformation, online propaganda, and more disturbingly, ethnic hate

speech, was pervasive, and created an atmosphere of mutual distrust, evidenced in the endless banters through on social media; a prominent battleground for 2019 election campaigns. The disinformation, accusations, and counter-accusations were so rife that President Buhari was reportedly rumored to be dead and replaced by a double or a clone while his major contender Alhaji Atiku Abubakar was allegedly said to be planning to distribute cash and food boxes at a political rally in addition to his purported plan to broker a deal with Boko Haram insurgents, in exchange for land and oil (Reality Check, 2019).

According to the International Centre for Investigative Reporting [ICIR] (2019:1), the 2019 general elections held in Nigeria featured violence, unrest, assault, intimidation, and the death of no less than 39 people. Surprisingly, the 2019 fiasco was driven by “violent propagandist messages spread on social media by agents of political parties, particularly supporters or opponents of the two major parties and their candidates: Incumbent president Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP)”. The propagandist messages were further complicated by photographs and videos of supposed rigging and violent attacks by political thugs which were spread on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp messenger; only to be found out to be fake and merely used as a weapon of disinformation by party propagandists and loyalists<sup>1</sup>. Just to be clear, these fake posts affected the psyche of ordinary Nigerians and led to the lowest voter turnout in Nigeria’s two-decade democracy – for fear of violence.

Lynch, Gadjanova & Saibu (2019:1) opine that by spreading misinformation, social media can be used to amplify communal tensions. “It [also] has a more subtle corrosive effect: it can fuel a widespread sense of skepticism in politics. This can encourage people to either support those who are most likely to protect them – as an individual or small interest group – or disengage altogether.” Social media is now being used to spread hostility, social unrest, and insurrection in society (Cyllah, 2014). The national chairman of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Uche Secondus, while addressing a crowd in Asaba, Delta state on January 31 said “They will obey the Constitution and be neutral, but if they don’t, if they join hands with INEC [the national electoral commission] to rig this election, what are they looking for?” Of course, as expected, the people chorused “War!” (Sahara Reporters, 2019:1). Meanwhile, the Governor of Kaduna state, Nasir el-Rufai, was quoted, on NTA, saying: “Those that are calling for

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<sup>1</sup> In May 2019, Facebook pulled 265 Instagram and Facebook accounts linked to Archimedes Group, an Israeli campaign agency. The accounts, posed as locals and local news agencies to spew fake election news in targeted West African countries, especially Nigeria. They reached a combined followership of almost 3 million people and spent almost a million dollars on advertising. The Digital Forensic Lab specifically found posts targeting both Atiku and Buhari’s supporters, suggesting Archimedes was lobbying for both sides simultaneously. The account managers were traced to locations in Israel, United Kingdom, Portugal and Senegal (see ICIR, 2019).

anyone to come and intervene in Nigeria, we are waiting for the person that would come and intervene, they would go back in body bags.” (Akinkuotu, 2019:1).

As Ugbede (2019) reports, Watching The Vote (WTV) Project monitored social media related electoral violence cases reported before the 2019 election in Nigeria and found out that:

*“A total of 47 critical incident reports have been received and confirmed within the period. These reports include incidences of hate speech, attacks on rallies, fighting between communities, an attack against election officials, attacks against candidates or their supporters, an attack against observers, brutality by security agents, voters inducement, and vandalism or destruction of properties belonging to their candidates or their supporters.” (p. 1)*

The foregoing is a testament to the bastardization of social media for inciting violence by the political elite, political parties, electoral candidates, and their enthusiastic supporters in Nigeria.

### **Panacea: Sustainable Development Goal 16**

For far too long, elections in Nigeria have been overly characterized by violence and conflict which constitutes a bane to integral human development. More than ever, the [re]commitment to the prevention of violent conflict, and promotion of justice and the rule of law as contained in SDG 16 cannot be overstated. SDG 16 is meant to “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” and is further divided into:

- 16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere
- 16.2 End abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children
- 16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all
- 16.4 By 2030, significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows, strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets, and combat all forms of organized crime
- 16.5 Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms
- 16.6 Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels
- 16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels
- 16.8 Broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance
- 16.9 By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration
- 16.10 Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, per national legislation and international agreements

16.a Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime

16.b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development (Thorpe, 2015)

Meanwhile, for the sake of this study, attention will be paid to:

16.1 Significantly reduce all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere 16.3 Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all

16.6 Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels

16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels

16.a Strengthen relevant national institutions, including through international cooperation, for building capacity at all levels, in particular in developing countries, to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime

For discussion purposes, the above areas will be addressed as 'peace, justice, and strong institutions. Peace, justice, and strong institutions are essential conduits for the attainment of sustainable development. Elections in Nigeria have been marred by ethnic and religious divisions, seemingly cyclical conflict, and violence. Electoral violence no doubt, has a vicious impact on a country's economic growth and development, resulting in long-standing grievances. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to significantly reduce all forms of violence, and work with governments and communities to find lasting solutions to conflict and insecurity. Accentuating peace and justice is key to this process, as is engendering strong institutions ([www.sdgfund.org](http://www.sdgfund.org)). Indeed, violence prevention is essential for sustainable development, just as violence reduction is development's most daunting task.

According to Chambers (2004), [sustainable] peace is a requisite for development. To ensure peace, society must address the root causes of conflicts and entrench participatory democracy, good governance, the rule of law, and justice, among a host of others- all issues the neglect of which often results in instability within states. As Igbuzor (2011) avers, the factors that make peace relatively elusive in Nigeria are ethno-religious conflict, Niger Delta crisis, and electoral violence. He notes that electoral violence is perpetrated during political activities and involves thuggery or intimidation. Curtailing electoral violence (particularly as stirred through social media) requires investment in human development through peacebuilding interventions, community empowerment, capacity building, and educational campaigns (University of Notre Dame, n.d).

To ensure community development, dire attention must be paid to responsiveness to citizen grievances and aspirations, good governance, social inclusion, accountability, and democratic institutions. As stated in SDG 16, 'strong institutions' are pivotal to the attainment of peace. Social media users have come to find solace and inclusion in the various communities that exist on the platform giving the negligence and non-responsiveness meted to them by the government. Social media is thus seen as a tool that guarantees 'a voice for the voiceless' where everyone's opinion counts. This in itself is not bad as it encourages participatory democracy, except that it does not exist outside of the platform and the people are still generally excluded from governance. This is why, it has become easy to spread lies against the government on the pages of social media, which, unfortunately, the users repose so much trust in. As a result, creating strong institutions outside social media is increasingly germane. The government must make frantic efforts to strengthen existing democratic institutions as well as create youth citizen-oriented institutions with social media presence to break the monopoly of social media mischief-makers.

The violent extremism attached to electronic electioneering must be dissuaded by elaborating on the adherence to the principles of justice and the rule of law. For emphasis, youths have to be educated on the need to promote peace using social media platforms. It is important that they understand the role of peace in the electoral process and how they fall into the equation. Educating social media users on violence prevention will be to discourage the use of hate speeches, disinformation, and propaganda to discredit any electoral candidate. As ICIR (2019) argues, political information warfare is being commercialized and weaponized, and Nigeria remains highly vulnerable to such attacks because of low media literacy levels.

According to the Civil Society Platform for Peacebuilding and Statebuilding [CSPPS] (2018), the role of young people in promoting peace, governance, and democracy must be treated as society's latest tall order. More awareness-raising is required for youth and could be done through the establishment of more tertiary and skills learning institutions, holding dialogue meetings, town hall meetings, focus group discussions, and training workshops. Engaging young people and other socially excluded groups, actively into the mainstream of promoting peace and non-violence through [social] media, as well as enhancing peaceful democratic transition and enhancing an efficient system of governance are highly instructive. There is the dire need to discourage the use of social media in promoting the following: aggressive languages and hate speeches between and among political parties and supporters; rumors of politically-motivated attacks; violent activities of politically-charged youth; drug abuse etc. as well as assaults on women. This is because, all of these, if not properly managed, could prove to be inciting and could undermine the electoral process and make the attainment of sustainable development goals difficult.

To understand the intricacy of [social media] and electoral violence, we need to examine the role of political elites, ideologies, values, and networks of change agents

in fostering or impeding social change processes. The over bloating of information, hate speech, propaganda, ethnic and religious incitements on social media can be averted if one adequately grasps the ideologies behind them, their ethnic and religious undertone, the role of the political actors, and the involvement of change agents in promoting division. This is because observably, the increased – albeit, ignored – demand for political inclusion, accountable institutions, and equitable justice systems has increased the role of elites in social media, selling their ideologies to the users with the promise of sociopolitical change and pro-poor policies. As Glazer & Wells (2019:1) submit, “political campaigns and advocacy groups are seeking help from the kingpins of the internet: YouTube celebrities, Twitter personalities, and Instagram-famous dogs” to brand their candidates and sell them to the electorates; sometimes in a controversial manner.

According to Enberg (2020), electoral candidates are increasingly turning to social media influencers to spread their messages and garner support for their campaigns thereby allowing them to reach a younger audience that is increasingly resistant to traditional advertising tactics. Wabara (2015:1) argues that without the help of branding experts and social media influencers, Buhari wouldn’t stand the chance of defeating President Goodluck Jonathan in 2015. “The experts polished his image and transformed him from a no-nonsense general into a likable person by all tribes in Nigeria unlike in his previous failed elections when the majority of Nigerians saw Buhari as a religious fanatic, a military dictator, and someone who had no human feeling.”<sup>2</sup>

Sustainable development goal 16 has as its focus: understanding and promoting good governance; social action for inclusion, accountability, and rule of law; partnerships and intermediation among citizens, states, and elites; transnational norms, institutions, and movements; the role of religious actors in community empowerment, development, and peacebuilding; and citizen action in preventing and recovering from armed conflict (the University of Notre Dame, n.d). The above recommendations provide an adequate response to question asked on ‘the role of political elites, ideologies, values, and networks of change agents in fostering or impeding social change processes’. By promoting good governance, inclusion, accountability, and rule of law, social media users will rely less on the propagandist messages that are being spread about a candidate but rather focus on how to consolidate the efforts of the government as citizens. Besides, for a government that can provide good governance and inclusion, it will require no need for propaganda as its achievements will speak for it. Furthermore, intermedia among citizens is necessary to checkmate the activities of local, national, and transnational networks of change agents that may want to foster electoral violence through social media. It is also important that

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<sup>2</sup> Since the introduction of social media to Nigerian electoral process, the playing field has become levelled in Nigerian politics. President Buhari and other politicians have since acknowledged the power of social media in sharing their vision with Nigerians and the world. A notable influencers that swayed votes in Buhari’s favour is Omojuwa (see Wabara, 2015).

the role of religious actors in peacebuilding is well consolidated as many Nigerians are divided along such primordial fault lines and this has in no small measure exacerbated the spate of electoral violence in Nigeria.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conducting elections in Nigeria without recording widespread violence has become difficult so much so that electoral violence is gradually becoming a marker for persistent democratic challenges faced in the country. Although, the proliferation of technology, and by extension, social media, have influenced the electoral cycle through planning, strategy, training, information, and campaign – which has increasingly made the process less arduous, encompassing, and more engaging –, yet, social media has in the same direction contributed to the furtherance of electoral violence in Nigeria, especially through disinformation, hate speech and propaganda. As the paper argues, emphasizing peace, justice, and strong institutions is highly relevant in curtailing electoral violence in Nigeria. This is explicitly contained in the Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) which seeks to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels. As a result, the paper makes the following recommendations.

That an Electoral Peace Commission (EPC) should be established to orientate Nigerians on how sacrosanct peace is to the continued survival of the Nigerian project. The EPC will be responsible for sensitizing both political parties, candidates, and electorates on the need for peace throughout the electoral process and how it can be ensured, especially on social media. The major focus of this Commission will be to act as an e-Ambassador with a dominant online presence to emphasize the need for promoting peace.

In addition to the above, peace and security education should be given priority by the government in such a way that Nigerians would be exposed to the need to act as agents of peace right from elementary school. As such, peace and security education should be treated as an integral part of the curricula which all students must undertake right from primary to tertiary educational levels. This will help to direct Nigerian youth into adopting a peaceful approach towards elections.

The establishment of a Justice Commission (JC) which has the people as its focus should be encouraged. This will promote the commitment to the promotion of justice and the rule of law by all. This Commission will also regularly sensitize Nigerians (particularly on social media platforms) on the importance of tolerance, human rights, equality of all, and freedom of [true] information.

The strengthening of electoral institutions to perform their duties devoid of interference is also recommended. Meanwhile, the labeling and censorship<sup>3</sup> of inciting words or statements on social media should be entrenched; especially during the electioneering process. In line with this, it is instructive that the 2015 Cybercrime Act be enforced to discourage hate speeches, disinformation, and propaganda about the election on social media.

The media must be made to collaborate with a consortium of civil society organizations in the country to fashion a dialogue space where all actors will provide feedback on the causes and solutions to social media and electoral violence. Going forward, this will enable them to improve on a culture of 'peace, justice, and strong institutions as well as disapprove of primordial sentiments that are capable of rousing tension, agitation, grudges, and electoral violence. By so doing, they can build a synergy of network and partnership between electoral candidates, electorates, civil society organizations, government officials, and the media.

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<sup>3</sup> Social media platforms such as Twitter have begun to label and warn about messages that contain disputed or misleading information. Twitter also acts on complaints by third parties, including governments, to remove illegal content in accordance with the laws of the countries in which people use the service (See Bicheno, 2020).

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