


# Chapter 10

## Social Media Landscape in Africa: Mobilising and Engineering Youths for Socio–Political Change in Sub–Saharan Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*Since the Arab Spring pro-democracy riots and upheavals that shook the Middle East and North African authoritarian regimes in 2010 and 2011 and the EndSARS protest against police brutality in Nigeria in 2020, the debate on the influence of social media in galvanizing youth to action has raged. The research was done to establish how social media has advanced the mobilization of youths for social-political change in sub-Saharan Africa in the last five years that countries in the region have witnessed successful general elections. Premised on the theoretical frameworks of media ecology and agenda-setting, the study explained how social media through improved affordable technology and democratization of media have aided and abetted the participation of young people in the transformation of society.*

### INTRODUCTION

With the advent of the internet and technological innovations including its applications, social media have invaded homes and become a crucial part of man's daily existence (Yan, 2021). Affordable internet services (data) and smartphones owned by the masses in sub-Saharan Africa, especially the youth, have encouraged the use of social media for all forms of communication and content production, and social-political mobilization. Defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary (2023) "as forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-3767-7.ch010

online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)” marketing and business promotions, social media applications including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, WeChat, blog. In 2023, the projected number of social media users worldwide was 4.89 billion while Africa has 384 million social media users with internet users put at 566 million (Statista, 2023).

Silver and Johnson (2018) wrote that in sub-Saharan Africa most people are gravitating toward social media for social activities over political, religious or commercial ones. In sub-Saharan Africa, most phone owners are use their devices to send text messages and take pictures or video; those who use social media (ranging from 43% in South Africa to 20% in Tanzania) share views on entertainment-related topics such as music, movies, and sports than they post about politics, religion or products they enjoy; they are more are likely to use their mobile devices for social and entertainment purposes than for information-seeking or career and commerce-related activities while around four-in-ten phone owners also use their mobile phones to access social networking sites (Silver and Johnson, 2018). The researchers stated that although mobile phones were responsible for most online presence in Africa, around 19 percent of the total population lived out of reach from mobile connection as of 2020.

However, Sasu (2022) noted that the use of social media increased in recent years, especially in Nigeria where it is deployed to follow friends, family, acquaintances, or actors and people in the art and entertainment industry, with WhatsApp being the most used platform in the country. As of the third quarter of 2021, this instant messaging and voice-over IP platform was used by 92 percent of Nigeria’s overall internet users ahead of Facebook and Instagram even though Facebook was the most preferred platform for the majority of individuals accessing the news on social media; men and youth are in the lead in social media usage in Nigeria (Sasu, 2022).

While in 2022, more than 58 percent of the users were men as was reflected across the various platforms. For instance, close to 59 percent of Nigerians on Facebook were men although overall Facebook usage was concentrated among individuals aged 18 – 34 years. The youth and male prevalence remain similar on other social network platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram. Consequently, young people in Nigeria were the most reached by social media advertising compared to people of other age groups (Sasu, 2022). As the Internet is needed for all social media connections, it plays vital roles in the development of social media in Nigeria. In 2020, smartphones and tablets were the most common devices from which the internet was accessed by around 84 percent of Internet users (Sasu, 2022).

Despite the evidence that social media is being used by youths in Africa, of all available data studied for this research none showed how social media has been leveraged for the socio-political mobilization of youths for social change in the 46 countries in sub-Saharan Africa including Nigeria, with the largest population of more than 200 million people and 149.8 million internet users as of August 2020 (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2020). This is the focus of this research to ascertain how social media has influenced the social-political mobilization of the youths, with particular attention on Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and The Gambia; all these countries held their general elections recently. The study hinged on media ecology and agenda-setting theories to show how technology innovations has democratized information dissemination through social media to advance human abilities, engineer social progress and make youth active participants and determinants in the socio-economic, electoral processes and governance in sub-Saharan Africa.

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