

I wrote my first blog in 2005, as part of the BBC's My Africa Project, a blogging project put together for 'Africa 05', a year-long series of events described at that time as "the biggest ever celebration of African culture ever organised in Britain". That year I worked as a pharmacist at a government hospital in Asaba, in Nigeria's oil-rich delta region. At that time Facebook didn't exist in Nigeria.

By Tolu Ogunlesi

# Youth and social media in Nigeria

**T**here was no Twitter, no Instagram. Mass mobile phone usage was only a few years old, and no one I knew regularly accessed the internet on their phone. I certainly didn't – my access was restricted to daily visits to an internet café a taxi ride away. I would take photos with a digital camera, load them onto my laptop, transfer them onto a memory stick, and then head for an internet café where I paid for access by the hour, and browsed surrounded by strangers.

My blog was one of several others by Africans across the continent, sharing details of their daily lives. It was an excellent demonstration of the amazing powers of the internet, allowing sharing and connections across a continent that until recently was defined more by the flow of refugees and weapons than by the flow of information.

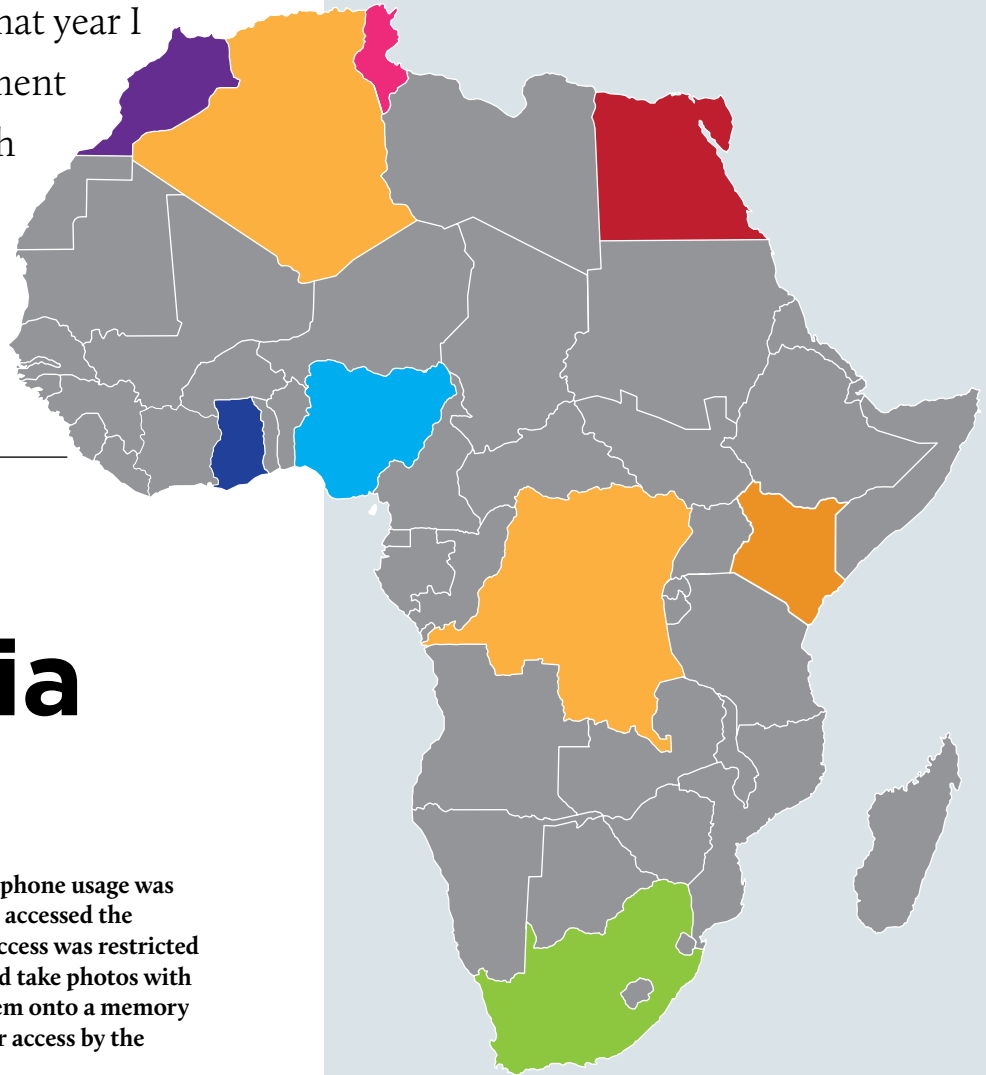
In the time since then I have launched three other blogs (two are now defunct), and joined Hi5 (which no one uses any longer). I am one of more than four million Nigerians who use smartphones (according to statistics from Informa Telecoms), one of six million on Facebook, one of the almost 50 million Nigerian users of the internet.

The turning point for social media as a tool of political engagement in Nigeria was 2010. In May of that year the President joined Facebook. It was the most potent endorsement any social media platform could get, in a country home to more people than any other country on the continent.

Suddenly Facebook became the place to go if you wanted to connect with the President. Posts went up regularly on that page. In a country where Presidents have always been inaccessible, it was a miracle of sorts. By the end of that year the President was the second most popular Head of State

## AFRICAN FACEBOOK USERS IN 2013

(Source: [www.socialbakers.com](http://www.socialbakers.com) Infographic designed by @ivanisawesome, [afrographique.tumblr.com](http://afrographique.tumblr.com))



# 50 386 760

African Facebook users

(Approx. March 2013)

### Similarly sized Facebook markets:

**Mexico** 39 945 620

**Indonesia** 47 165 080

**India** 62 963 440

young and  
**MEDIATED**

An overview of the latest user numbers in the largest Facebook markets across Africa.

Ghana  
**1 465 560**

Morocco  
**5 250 340**

Algeria  
**4 322 820**

Tunisia  
**3 436 720**

Egypt  
**13 010 580**

LARGEST MARKET IN AFRICA  
20<sup>TH</sup> WORLDWIDE

Size similar to Australia, Taiwan,  
Malaysia and Japan

Kenya  
**1 886 560**

DRC  
**891 140**

South Africa  
**5 534 160**

2<sup>ND</sup> LARGEST IN AFRICA  
32<sup>ND</sup> WORLDWIDE

Size similar to Saudi Arabia,  
Romania and Ecuador

Nigeria  
**5 357 500**

3<sup>RD</sup> LARGEST IN AFRICA  
36<sup>TH</sup> WORLDWIDE

Size similar to Ecuador, Morocco  
and Belgium



Felix Masi/Africa Media Online

on Facebook, after Barack Obama (granted he occupied a *distant* second place).

The excitement spilled over into a book, *My Friends and I* published in the President's name – a collection of Facebook conversations between the President and his citizens. Much of it was fawning commentary, expectedly, from a citizenry utterly impressed by the effortless access they had to the most powerful man in the land.

Mr Jonathan's earliest announcement of his desire to run for President appeared on Facebook – again, a first. It was timed to coincide with the widely advertised declaration by another prominent candidate.

All of this was in the lead-up to the Presidential elections in April 2011. As the first general elections since Barack Obama came to office, everyone knew this was going to be different. This was going to be our opportunity to replicate, to the extent to which our circumstances allowed us, the magic of Obama.

And we tried. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many young people voted for the first time in their lives in the 2011 elections. That's in part because social media made it cool. Popular musician Eldee (Lanre Dabiri) was one of the celebrities encouraging newly registered voters (there was a registration process in January 2011, to update the list of voters) to tweet or Facebook their newly-acquired cards. (And on election day it was not unusual to see photos of ink-stained thumbs circulating on social media).

Following the Goodluck Jonathan example, other politicians took to Facebook and Twitter, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, and success.

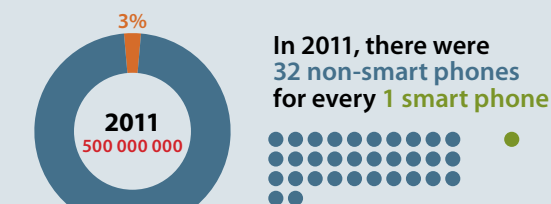
Social media would go on to feature prominently in the elections proper. The

Electoral Commission collaborated with a number of civil society groups to set up a Social Media Tracking Center that monitored online activity relating to the elections – the distribution of voting materials, polling booth incidents, and results (armed with mobile phones, citizens were tweeting and Facebooking results as soon as they were announced at polling booths). Tools like Revoda and ReclaimNaija allowed users to send reports via text message to the Electoral Commission.

Social media usage in Nigeria cannot be understood outside of the mobile phone revolution. At the turn of the century the total number of mobile phone lines in Nigeria was less than 300 000. Today there are 149 million mobile lines, 112 million of which are in use, making Nigeria one of the fastest growing mobile phone markets in the world. Meanwhile landline usage has been dropping steadily; the number of landlines in use today is only a third of what it was in 2009. Increasingly, internet-enabled mobile phones have become cheaper, allowing more people to go online via their mobile phones. In a city like Lagos where commuters spend several hours daily in traffic jams, mobile phones have come in handy to while away the time. According to the mobile social media network Eskimi, mobile internet usage in Nigeria is ten times more than desktop usage.

When Nigeria's President Jonathan says he believes he is "the most criticised President in the whole world", it is in large part due to social media and the way it has allowed frustrated Nigerians to express their opinions without censorship.

On 1 January 2012, news filtered out that

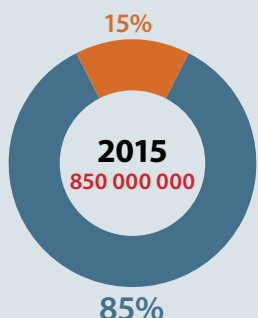


In 2011, there were  
32 non-smart phones  
for every 1 smart phone



## MOBILE PHONES IN AFRICA

(Sources: Informa  
Telecoms and Media.  
Infographic designed  
by @ivanisawesome)



In 2015, we expect  
Africa to have:

**722 500 000**  
non-smart phones

**127 500 000**  
smart phones

In 2015, there will be  
5.6 non-smart phones  
for every 1 smart phone



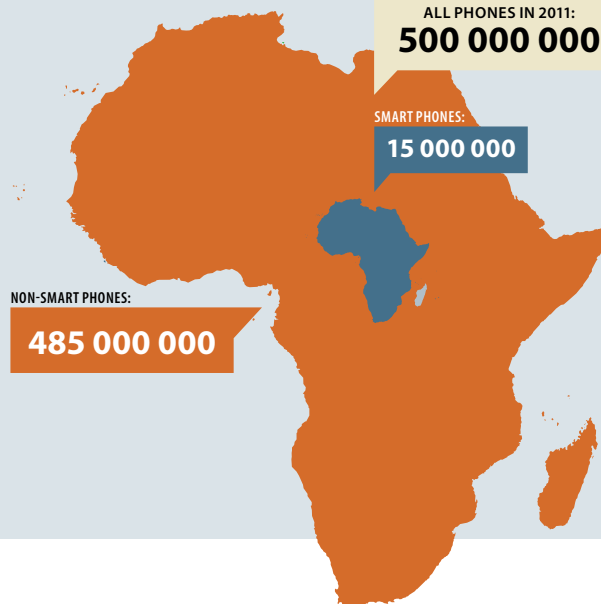
NON-SMART PHONES:

**485 000 000**

ALL PHONES IN 2011:  
**500 000 000**

SMART PHONES:

**15 000 000**



the Federal Government had removed the subsidy on petrol, causing prices to jump from 65 naira to 140 naira. Days later public protests started in parts of the country. Expectedly young people turned to social media. The President's Page, the same one that inspired the *My Friends & I* book, was a prime target. Thousands of angry messages appeared on it, from citizens who now had a chance to communicate their feelings 'directly' to the man in charge. And who had seen how social media had worked in the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Social media allowed many of us to vicariously participate in the Egyptian revolution, so that when the fuel subsidy protests started in Nigeria we had a model to guide us.

Mr Jonathan's complaints can be seen in the same light as the comments by Nigeria's Senate President that "social media has become a threat to the ethics of media practice and good governance because of its accessibility and absolute freedom" (August 2012); and the outburst by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan in which he described social media as "the worst menace to society" (June 2013).

Long before them, the former Philippine President Joseph Estrada reportedly blamed "the text-messaging generation" (this was in 2001, the pre-Twitter, pre-Facebook age) for the protests that led to his impeachment.

In the same speech in which he expressed reservations about social media the Nigerian Senate President acknowledged that "the emergence of the social media like Facebook, twitter, BlackBerry Messenger, YouTube etc have changed the face of the media practice by making information sharing easier, faster and quicker."

Like young people across the world, young Nigerians, who form the bulk of social media users – the FactBound survey found that 70 percent of social media users in Nigeria were between 18 and 33 – are fast realising the extent to which social media has altered the dynamics of the world. The extent to which

social media has resulted in the democratisation of access to information, and expression of opinion, and a shift in the balance of power between the leaders and the led.

The 2015 general elections will provide the perfect opportunity for young Nigerians – and an estimated 75 percent of Nigeria's 160 million people are below the age of 35, and about 50 percent below 18 – to put the much-debated power of their numbers to the test, supported by social media.

Until then the Twitter and Facebook debates will continue, on *everything* from the size of the Nigerian President's feeding budget, to Big Brother Africa, and the English Premier League.

According to a 2011 survey by FactBound, a research consultancy, "networking" and "communication" are the two most popular uses of social media in Nigeria, and Facebook was by far the most popular and widely-used social media platform in the country (45 percent of Facebook users were spending between one and three hours daily on the site; 18 percent spent between five and seven hours daily). Only one in every three respondents claimed social media had influenced their political beliefs, compared to 86 percent who said it had influenced their social lives.

Nigeria's most popular blogger is a young woman called Linda Ikeji, who describes her blog as covering "News, Events, Entertainment, Lifestyle, Fashion, Beauty, Inspiration and yes... Gossip!" Politics shows up only occasionally; and it's certainly not the reason why the blog is the most popular in Nigeria. Linda has got her own BlackBerry App, and hers is the only blog featured on the MTN Mobile Newspaper service, which provides breaking news to subscribers on their phones.

The "social" in social media will continue to define its usage amongst Nigerian youth, and its application as a tool for political engagement will mostly depend on the extent to which it still manages to fulfill its responsibilities as a vehicle for triggering and sustaining human connection.



Tolu Ogunlesi is a journalist, editor and blogger. He was Features Editor and Editorial Board Member at NEXT Newspaper between 2009 and 2011. He has written for the Financial Times, CNN.com, the UK Guardian, Al Jazeera, NEXT, Forbes Africa and several other publications, and was awarded a CNN/Multichoice African Journalism Prize in 2009. He writes a weekly column for Nigerian daily newspaper PUNCH, and tweets actively at @toluogunlesi. He lives in Lagos, Nigeria. [to4ogunlesi@yahoo.com](mailto:to4ogunlesi@yahoo.com)