WHOSE E-GOVERNANCE?: A CRITIQUE OF ONLINE CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA

Isaac Olawale ALBERT
Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies
University of Ilorin
Ilorin, Nigeria
E-mail: ioalbert2004@yahoo.com

> Beyond the rhetorical discourse of metaphor, hyperbole and disconnected futurology, there is scope for a radical policy agenda in the sphere of e-democracy. E-democracy should not be conceived as a panacea for all the flaws of political democracy and social communication. But it does hold out hope of contributing to the development of two incomplete historical projects: the Internet and democracy (OECD 2003:159).

Abstract

This paper took a critical look at the state of e-governance in Africa from the supply and demand points of view. The supply side refers to the readiness of African states to practice e-governance while the demand segment refers to the capacity and motivation of citizens to force e-governance on their representatives in government. The paper reviewed the state of e-readiness in the continent and concluded that the continent is far behind the global standards. This problem is blamed in extant literature on the pervasiveness of poverty in the continent which makes the necessary infrastructure of e-goverrnance to be lacking. The paper moved the debate forward by arguing that lack of infrastructure is not as weighty in the explanation of the problem as corruption and lack of the political will for e-democracy. The paper cited some examples to back up this argument. Citizens of African states are equally not able to boost the state of e-governance in their societies largely because many of them are still bugged down with how to ensure daily survival in the harsh social, economic, and political environments under which they live. Efforts made by non-governmental organizations to open websites to promote deliberative democracy have led to different types of problems. To solve all these problems, the paper made three important recommendations: the dismantling of the secret State, the democratization of the concept of national security, and the integration of the e-democracy processes within broader constitutional structures and debates of African states.

Key Words: *e-governance, e-democracy*

JEL Classification: O3, P48

1. INTRODUCTION

It is a popular knowledge that the quality of governance in Africa is very low. This accounts for the poor state of human security in the continent. The problem, which results basically from the self-seeking political behaviour of the elite class, questions the entire notion of representative democracy, undermines state legitimacy in addition to questioning the credibility of the ruling elites in the continent. These conditions lead to different types of problems and responses: resort to self-help strategies by citizens, decreasing public trust

in electoral democracy, proliferation of warlords and quarrelsome pro-democracy/human rights organizations, and the consequent misuse of state powers by law enforcement agencies. The argument of this paper is that this discordant state of state-citizen relations can be remedied through e-governance.

E-governance is based on the premise that the more a government does its business online, the more it is trusted by citizens, and the less violent conflicts the society would have to contend with. The take-off point of our paper is the position canvassed by the World Summit on the Information Society in 2003 that the information and communication technologies [ICT] have significant roles to play in future African development [see Okapaku 2003]. The report underscored the fact that the New Partnership for African Development [NEPAD] places emphasis on the dual strategies of *ICT Development* and *ICT for Development* [ICT4D]. Taking the foregoing into consideration, this paper posed and tried to provide answers to a number of questions: What is the present state of e-governance in Africa? The question is answered from the supply and demand points of view. What hope for the development and growth of e-governance in the continent?

1.1 Conceptual Framework

To UNESCO, e-governance is "the public sector's use of information and communication technologies with the aim of improving information and service delivery, encouraging citizen participation in the decision-making process and making government more accountable, transparent and effective" (http://www.portal-unesco.org/, 2003). The Pacific Institute of Management in India considers it to be "application of ICTs to the process of government functioning to bring out Simple, Moral, Accountable, Responsive and Transparent governance" (http://www.pimanagement.org/).

The definition most appropriate for this paper is the one provided by the African Training and Research Centre in Administration for Development (CAFRAD) within the framework of the e-Africa Initiative for Good Governance. It defines e-governance as "the use of ICTs, and especially the Internet, to adopt a new conception and attitude of governing and managing where participation and efficiency are required of all the partners linked in a network" (cited from Misuraca 2007). The definition presents e-governance as a new way of co-coordinating, planning, formulating and implementing decisions and operations related to governance problems. It can be used by governments "to re-invent themselves, get closer to the citizenry and forge closer alliances and partnerships with diverse communities of interest, practice, expertise, conviction and inter-dependence within the context of national and international development agendas" (ibid).

The meaning of "e-governance" is better appreciated by juxtaposing it with the concept of e-government. The latter refers to the ways public sector institutions use online resources to conduct business of government and share information with members of the public (Okot-Uma 2000; Holmes 2001; Caston and Tapscott 1992). On the other hand, e-governance refers to the processes (vision, strategies, planning, leadership and resources) for ensuring e-government.

E-governance targets three related objectives: "improving government processes (e-administration); connecting citizens (e-citizens and e-services) and building external interactions (e-society)" (Heeks 2001:3). In other words, e-governance enhances popular

political participation and democratic processes in general. Two areas in which this has manifested in some parts of the world are (i) online voting and (ii) online consultation. The other areas that are less talked about are input into policy making, public hearings, online campaigns, and building of online (political) communities.

Complementary to the concept of e-governance is e-democracy. The latter deals with how citizens influence state policies, public sector process and legislative processes through the use of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs). The main benefit of e-democracy is the improvement in citizens' acquisition of vital government information and enhanced opportunity to input into governance. All these empower and better equip citizens to ask those ruling them or representing their interests in the parliament the right questions (Norris 2001).

Three types of information are involved in a process of e-governance from the supply (government) side: (i) general information that the state has the obligation to put in the public domain. Members of the public must have access to such information and digital technology provides easiest access to them; (ii) the information that people can have access to on "need-to-know" basis, and (iii) classified information. These are information having to do with national security which must be kept away from the public domain. The way the three types of information, most especially the first two, are shared with citizens vary from one society to the other and the process is an indicator of how democratic or otherwise a society is. Undemocratic societies often treat the first two as "national security" information and citizens are prevented from having access to them. A society that has this type of problem will find it difficult to embrace e-governance.

2. MEASURING AFRICA'S E-READINESS

What is the state of e-readiness in Africa? "E-readiness", according to Ifinedo (2005b:55), refers to "how nations across the globe fare in terms of creating, diffusing, adopting and using the various components of a networked economy". Existing tools for calculating this relates more to a nation's readiness for business or economic growth, and those that focus on the ability of the entire society to benefit from ICT. E-readiness has both economic and political aspects. Our focus in this paper is on e-governance rather than e-commerce. The two are however interlinked.

The above question can be answered from both the supply and demand sides. The supply side refers to the extent to which the state is ready to pursue the objectives of e-governance while the demand side pertains to the capacity and readiness of citizens to take advantage offered by the ICT in the dissemination of the information needed for becoming more active citizens.

Measured as an indication of state capacity and responsiveness, "e-readiness" refers to the availability of requisite technological infrastructures, legal frameworks, institutional and human resources and political will to use ICTs to promote good governance or promote a nation's economic, social and political interests on the international scene. Several things are involved in the process. On the connectivity side, the issues to be taken into consideration in e-readiness include ICT access and availability, ICT affordability, ICT quality and reliability, and electrical supply and delivery system. On the political side, the issues include political leaders' vision and priority; strategy, planning and coordination;

public-private partnership and digital inclusion. What is the level of information security in the society? Can networked information be trusted? The issues to be condiered here include the legal framework for information dissemination; enforcement and prosecution of misuse of information; internal system security. How knowledgeable is the society about ICT? The last question can be answered by taking a critical look at the extent to which primary, secondary and post secondary education systems incorporate knowledge of ICTs.

Most of the extant literature on e-readiness in Africa, including the annual "E-readiness ranking" reports done by the Economic Intelligence Unit of The Economist, and a few articles published in the *International Journal of Education and Development using Information and Communication Technology* conclude that the level of e-readiness in Africa is very low. The problem is severally blamed on the unsuited infrastructure in the continent. This issue was given a critical attention by Tankoano (2001) in a paper presented delivered at same Regional workshop on "Building e-governance capacity in Africa" in 2001. His main argument is that Africa has the most unsuited infrastructure for e-governance in the world as shown in the following table:

Table 1: Inventory of infrastructures

	Telephone subscribers/ 100 hts in 2001 (fixed+cellular)	Televisions/100 hts in 2000	Computers/100 hts in 2001
Africa	5.56	7.3	1.06
Americas	61.54	48.0	26.57
Asia	19.83	20.3	3,31
Europe	84.39	52.1	17.94
Oceania	84.97	54.8	39.91
World	32-77	27.0	8.42

Source: Tankoano 2001: 6

He blamed this poor state of infrastructure in Africa on the several factors: the consistent history of political instability in various parts of the continent; official corruption; absence of global vision for setting up good governance in thre NTIC sector; low appropriation level of technologies; poor regulation mechanisms; and, the culture of predatory consumerism which places no emphasis on attracting further foreign investors (Tankoano 2001:8).

In a paper presented delivered at same Regional workshop on "Building e-governance capacity in Africa" in 2001, Roslyn Docktor of the McConnell International presented the following information which further enriches the point made by Tankoani above on the state of e-governance in Africa:

Table 2: Connectivity Access: PC Penetration

Categories	Countries
Medium-High	Mauritius
Medium Levels	Botswana, South Africa
Low-medium levels	Namibia, Togo and Senegal
Low levels	Angola, Benin, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Guniea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Zimbabwe.

Source: Docktor 2001: 18

Table 3: E-Leadership...Vision and planning: National Strategy

Categories	Countries
Medium-High	South Africa
Medium levels	Benin. Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritania, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal, Uganda
Low levels	Angola, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria.

Source: Docktor 2001: 20

Table 4: Leadership…Usage: Government web pages

Categories	Countries
Medium-High	Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Zimbabwe
Medium levels	Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda
Low-medium levels	Burundi, Chad, Gabon, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Niger, Sierra Leone, Togo, Zambia.
Low levels	Benin, Congo, Guinea, Eritrea, Somalia.

Source: Docktor 2001: 21

Table 5: IT Students in tertiary education

Categories	Countries
High	Botswana, Cameroon, Mauritania, Nigeria, Tanzania
Medium –High	Angola, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Gabon, Ghana, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, South Africa, Togo, Zimbabwe.
Medium Levels	Benin, Burkina Fasso, Chad, Kenya, Mali, Lesotho, Liberia, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia
Low-Medium levels	Mauritius
Low levels	Guinea Bissau

Source: Docktor 2001:25

Following the democratization and reform processes that took place in Africa in the 1990s (see Gyimah-Boadi 2004), many African countries now have website in which basic information (like weather, natural resources, investment environment and the like) are provided. The problem is that the websites hardly provide for any serious citizen engagement of the state in any of the four main aspects of policy making: agenda-setting, analysis, formulation and implementation. For this reason, the citizens are at sea most of the time on what the government is up to. The media tries to help citizens by going around sniffing for the information that members of the public are eager to have. In the process, these media houses come on collision path with the government resulting for the rampart cases of journalists' harassment and even imprisonments across the continent.

3. DATA ANALYSIS: NIGERIA AS A CASE STUDY

Tables 2 to 5 above shows that, on the whole, South Africa has the best e-readiness ranking in Africa. This is followed by Botswana. The studies done by Ifinedo (2005b:62) and the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2007, 2008) came to same conclusion on the leadership role of South Africa in the area of e-readiness in Africa. The country has well nurtured policies in this direction since the 1990s (Miller 1999; Molla 2000; WEF 2002).

Whereas South Africa got the 35th position in the global e-readiness rankings of the Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU 2007:5] of 2007 with 6.10 points, Nigeria, another giant on the continent, occupied the 60th position with 3.92 points. In the 2008 rankings, South Africa moved down to the 39th position with 5.95 points and Nigeria got the 62nd position with an improved 4.25 score [EIU 2008:5]. This shows that the gap between South Africa and Nigeria are gradually narrowing down.

Attempts to explain e-readiness in Africa blame the poor performance of some of the states on infrastructural problems (see Odedra et al 1993; Molla 2000; WSIS 2004; Ifinedo 2005a, 2005b). The issue of political will does not seem to have been sufficiently addressed in these studies. This issue, which is of particular interest to us in this paper, can be clearly established using Nigeria as a case study.

Nigeria is considered, globally, to be an interesting paradox. Though supposed to be among the richest countries given its better macroeconomic outlook due to expanded production of oil and gas, it ranks among the poorest of the poor countries in the world. This is to the extent that the country ranks among those in which citizens have the lowest level of PC penetration in the African continent (see Table 2) though the country ranks among the African countries with the highest number of ICT students in tertiary institutions (Table 5)[1]. In other words, the country produces ICT experts it does not need. This symbolically explains why Nigerian experts are scattered all over the world today. Though the country is rated "Medium-High" for having functional government websites (Table 4), it hardly have as a national strategy the use of ICT for promoting good governance (Table 3). It is a country in which all forms of state information are still given the toga of "national security".

---

[1] This conclusion is corroborated by the findings of Woherem (1996:77) that Nigeria and South Africa have relatively larger amounts of infrastructure, good education and technical endowments in Africa.

How do we explain the Nigerian situation? The problem is inherent in the political history of the country. Nigeria got its independence from the British on October 1, 1960. It was under democratic rule for just few years when the military took over in 1966. Civilians came back to power in 1979 but were ousted once again in 1983. Power returned to civilians in 1999. Throughout the military era, citizens were denied access to essential government information and this made e-governance non-essential. Nigerians were not granted free access to wireless telephone until 2000 following the transition to civil rule. Journalists who tried to break through the glass ceilings (erected by the military) to get official information were sent to jail, brutalized or killed. Since the 1999 political transition, the political leadership of the country has been making progress towards becoming part of what is now known globally as the network economy (Hart 2003), knowledge economy (Neff 1998), E-economy (Turner 2001), and information economy (Castells 1999a). Thus, the deplorable situation in Nigeria which was reported in 2001 by Tankoano and Docktor must have drastically improved by now.

It is a truism that in order to keep their countries on a competitive track economically, many African governments are clearly committing themselves to ICT infrastructure initiatives. However, many of these websites do not contain any serious governance issues. The bulk of what is in the national web sites are not for the citizens but foreign investors. In other words, the websites are more for e-commerce (if at all realizable given the political environment of some of the countries) than e-democracy.

A situation where African governments are talking of delivering services to the international community via electronic channels and they are not willing to deliver public services to their citizens using digital technology shows that these governments are not transparent. The paradox is that many of these prospective foreign investors that these African governments are trying to impress know that the inability of the governments to peacefully engage their citizens from within is a basic hindrance to the flow if international businesses with them. The point to be made out of this observation is that it is not the presence of the web sites that matters but the benefits that they hold for the citizens.

Two conditions are needed for the free flow of information in a society: the dismantling of the secret State and the democratization of the concept of national security. Nigerian leaders, like many other African leaders, are not ready to meet these conditions. Many members of the ruling elite in the country still have a lot to hide from the public. As long as this situation persists, e-governance will continue to be a mirage in the country.

The performance of the country during the 2003 and 2007 elections can be used as an example. The elections were characterized by different forms of malfeasance the most disturbing of which was lack of access to relevant public information: list of voters, location of polling booths, amount of money spent by politicians on campaign activities, and the like. This limited the extent to which Nigerians could exercise their civic rights before, during and after elections. For example, many Nigerians never had the opportunity of checking their names on INEC's voters register during the 2007 elections simply because the electoral body failed to display the registers, whether publicly or electronically. The reports of the local and international observers show that INEC seized this opportunity to rig elections for the ruling party (PDP) in different parts of the country. Several of the election results are not being upturned by courts across the country on the account of their

33

obvious irregularities. The government of President Yar'adua indirectly acknowledged the enormity of the problem by setting up a political reforms committee immediately he came to power in April 2007.

INEC's refusal to grant access to relevant information is typical of the Nigerian governance system. Many media houses in the country are known to have taken to the collision path with the Nigerian state as a result of their efforts to report "official secrets". Some of the cases of harassment of journalists associated with the 2007 elections include the following:

> Armed invasion of the Abuja premises of the African Independent Television (AIT)

> Harassment of journalists during the recent May 1st 2007 workers' day celebrations especially the assault on Mr. Dare Folorunso, a cameraman with Ondo state Radiovision Corporation in Akure, Ondo State by a police officer.

> The arrest and detention of human rights, pro-democracy, socialist and trade union activists as well as the seizure of their newsletters and books also during the workers' day celebration2.

Media Rights Agenda, one of the non-governmental organizations defending the interests of journalists in Nigeria, has been working on this issue for quite some time. It started by ramping up campaigns to convince Nigerian lawmakers to pass a draft Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill that would guarantee every Nigerian unfettered access to information as it concerns the conduct of public affairs, records and documents and by so doing broaden the active participation of Nigerians in public discourse on issues of governance as enshrined in Article 13 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The main rationale for the bill is the fact that the major set backs to the growth of Nigeria's fledgling democracy is the fact that most official transactions, both in the public and private sectors, are shrouded in secrecy.

In Africa, five countries already have similar laws: Angola, Ethiopia, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe. Whether these countries actually comply with the tenets of the bills is a different debate that we do not want to pursue in this presentation. A few other African countries are going through a process of adopting FOI bills. The countries are Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Tanzania and Zambia (Odinkalu 2008).

The FOI bill was passed by the two chambers of the national assembly in 20063 but the former President, Olusegun Obasanjo, refused to sign it into law on the ground that it would undermine Nigeria's national security4. One other complaint of the former President, which

---

2 Media Rights Agenda, http://www.mediarightsagenda.org/mfdstatement.html.
3 Media Rights Agenda, "Senate passes freedom of information bill", http://www.mediarightsagenda.org/senatepassfoib.html (accessed 18/6/07).
4 Media Rights Agenda, "President Obasanjo refuses to sign the freedom of information bill", http://www.mediarightsagenda.org/obasanjorefuses.html (accessed 18/6/07).

he claimed to have fruitlessly taken up with the National Assembly, is that the title of the bill ought to have been "Right to Information" rather than "Freedom of Information Bill".

The Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) described the refusal of Obasanjo to assent to the bill as a major setback for democratic governance in West Africa given the leadership role of Nigeria in the sub-region. Many other West African countries would have followed the Nigerian example by having their own information bill. Obasanjo's action, according to the group, prevented Nigeria from providing leadership to the rest of the sub-region in a crucial area of democratic consolidation. It therefore called on the National Assembly to rise up to the occasion by invoking its powers under the Nigerian constitutional to countermand the President's vetoing of the bill. This goal could not be achieved before May 29, 2007 when Obasanjo handed over power to Yar'Adua. The latter does not appear to be in any hurry to give due attention to the bill.

The main problem with Africa is that its leadership has aversion for open access to official information. It is not that these leaders do not know what democracy stands to benefit from e-democracy or e-governance. For example during the 2007 elections in Nigeria, the government tried to force e-voting system on the country but this was rebuffed by Nigerians and the National Assembly based on the argument that the process would contribute more significantly to the rigging of elections in the country[5]. Many rural communities in the country lack electricity to run or charge the voting machines. The leading presidential candidates in the 2007 elections also did some of their campaigns online (see Albert and March 2007). Nigerians now register for the public examinations (most especially the examinations conducted by the National Examinations Council0 online. Graduates of Nigerian universities going on national service now register online. In other words, the problem faced by Nigeria is not that of lack of information about the benefits of e-governance but lack of interest in engaging it in a manner that would benefit citizens. These political leaders sustain themselves in power through the promotion and perpetuation of public ignorance.

4. THE DEMAND SIDE

E-governance has both the supply and demand sides. As noted earlier, the supply side has to do with the readiness of the state to actively engage citizens using digital technology. The demand side, on the other hand, has to do with the readiness and capacity of citizens to engage the state. The state-citizen engagement can be based on the following tools provided by OECD:

---

[5] The reliability of e-voting is still debated in many parts of the world. The issues are around the security and reliability of the mechanism. In Ireland and the Netherlands, public advocacy groups have raised the level of debate about the reliability of e-voting most especially the ability of voters to verify election results resulting from it. Even in the US, the conduct of e-voting machines is believed to be imperfect [EIU 2007:18].

Table 1: Tools for online engagement at each stage of policy-making

Stage in policy-making	Information	Consultation	Participation
Agenda setting	site-specific search engines E-mail alerts for new policy issues Translation support for several languages style checkers to remove jargon	Online surveys and opinion polls Dscussion forums Monitoring emails Bullet boards Frequently asked questions (FAQs)	E-communities E-petitions E-referenda
Analysis	Translation support for several languages style checkers to remove jargon	Evidence-managed facilities Expert profiling	Electronic citizen juries E-communities
Formulation	Advanced style checking to help interpret technical and legal terms	Discussion forums Online citizen juries E-community tools	E-petitions E-referenda amending legislation
Implementation	Natural language style checkers E-mail newsletters	Discussion forums Online citizen juries E-community tools	E-mail distribution list for target groups
Monitoring	Online feedback Online publication of annual reports	Online surveys and opinion polls Discussion forums Monitoring e-mails Bulletin boards Frequently asked questions (FAQs)	E-petitions E-referenda

Source: OECD 2003:15

The above table shows that citizens must be able to engage state policies in terms of agenda-setting, analysis, formulation, implementation and monitoring. They must be willing to constitute themselves into discussion groups or e-communities that analyze government policies, send petitions to appropriate authorities and engage in all activities that could force the government to perform better.

The point was made at the earlier part of this paper that the availability of the necessary infrastructure are a major prerequisite for the citizens to be able to do all these. The Economist Intelligence Unit [2007:1] attempted to move us beyond this conclusion by arguing that the e-readiness of a country "derives from more than just the number of computers, broadband connections and mobile phones in the country; also critical are citizens' ability to utilize technology skillfully, the transparency of the business and legal systems, and the extent to which governments encourage the use of digital technologies". The fact remains that if a government is not interested in promoting e-governance as we have shown above, the onus lies on citizens to make the government do so. The question

that the focus of his paper forces us to ask here pertains to how well are Africans able to use digital technology skillfully to protect their interests in governance?

African citizens do not seem to have enough capacity and motivation for e-governance. In its widely cited work entitled, *Promise and problems of e-democracy: Challenges of online citizen engagement*, OECD (2003:10) argued inter alia that "The barriers to greater online citizen engagement in policy-making are cultural, organisational and constitutional not technological. Overcoming these challenges will require greater efforts to raise awareness and capacity both within governments and among citizens".

Clift (2002) argued in one of his works that citizens will get more interested in using the various tools of e-democracy once governments are themselves ready to deliver more services online and in a honest and speedy way that can easily arouse the interests of the citizens. The process work more easily when the government is tolerant enough to welcome feedback from citizens about the information disseminated. All these are however difficult in a society where the political leaders are not altruistic, very corrupt and depends on the perpetuation of ignorance for sustaining themselves in power. Under such an atmosphere it is not in the interest of the ruling class for citizens to have access to vital information of governance. This is where the problems lies and this explains why civil society organizations have taken it upon themselves to work in the direction of promoting e-governance.

Issues pertaining to the ability of the African people to engage their governments using digital technologies were raised in a paper I presented at the 12th General Assembly of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa [CODESRIA], Yaoundé, Cameroon November 7-12, 2008. The paper argued that African people are still engaged with basic challenges of survival [access to food, health provision, water, electricity, good educational opportunities] than to have the time and resources for engaging in e-governance. They lack access to computers and have to spend more time in work places in order to earn more money. Those who have easy access to computers face the problem of erratic power supply. Most of these people thus depend on offline sources for getting information about governance and for engaging the government [see Albert 2008].

Following the poor level of Africans' capacity to engage their governments using digital technology and given the governments' lack of readiness to give open access to state information, a number of human rights and pro-democracy groups are mushrooming in different parts of the continent to engage the government using digital technologies. Some of the subaltern online discussion groups established by these organizations in Nigeria include www.saharareports.com, www.economicconflidential.com, www.againstbabangida.com, and www.nigeriavillagesquare.com. The four provide the opportunity for anybody to make contributions to the discussion of the problems facing Nigeria.

Many of the newspapers in the continent have online editions which disseminate essential information that the state would have preferred to keep away from the public domain. The reach of these media houses, and the feedback they get from members of public in terms of both offline and online rejoinders, are of nightmarish concerns to many African

governments. Many of these media houses are thus visited with all forms of repressions. A typical Nigerian example is cited below.

In September and October 2008, the President of Nigeria, Alhaji Umar Yar'Adua, suddenly "vanished" from Nigeria. He was reported by his aides to be engaged in holy pilgrimage in Saudi Arabia but the media reported that he was receiving treatment abroad for the kidney-related problems he has. Business of government, including the swearing in of the new Defence Chiefs, was halted due to the unexplained absence of the President from the country. Like he left the country, President Yar'Adua sneaked back to the country in October and had to sack the Secretary to the Federation of Nigeria, Ambassador Kingibe on issues related to the management of the information on his health. In November 2008, the Abuja-based T*he Leadership* newspaper carried the news that the health of the President was deteriorating and that some medical doctors were flown in from Saudi Arabia to treat him. The President responded by taking the media house to court "at least to serve as a lesson to the others".

Not satisfied with the step taken by the President, and not willing to abide with the aspects of the Nigerian laws saying that any erring media house should be reported to the Nigeria Press Council for disciplinary actions, four editors of the media house were detained by overzealous men of the State Security Service (SSS) and their release was tied to the condition that they disclose the source of their information about the health of the President. Policemen from the Force Criminal Investigation Department (FCID) too invaded the premises of the newspapers and left with some computers where they "smartly" hoped to find answers to the questions that the SSS were asking the detained editors (*Vanguard*, November 18, 2007:1,5; *The Nation*, November 18, 2008:4). This particular incident graphically illustrates the extent to which Nigerian leaders are opposed to the idea of Nigerians having access to any information, including that of the health of the President they elected into office. Many African countries are like Nigeria. They are led by people who have unilaterally attached the toga of "national security" to all forms information dealing with government business. E-democracy is a mere pipe dream under this kind of atmosphere.

5. CONCLUSION

Two main points were made in this paper. The first is that African states ranking very low in e-governance. The problem results from the self-seeking behaviour of those leading the continent. The African people too lack the capacity and motivation to force their governments to engage in e-governance. Pro-democracy and human rights groups have established different forms of websites to fill the void. But more has to be done.

In concluding this paper, the fact must be faced that it is difficult to evaluate e-engagement and making sense of its contributions to governance. For many more years to come, making an objective assessment of the situation will be pretty difficult. Even in the developed world, there are several problems to be taken into consideration. Macintosh (2001) paints a worst case scenario when he succinctly argued in one of his papers that "there is, as of yet, no formal link between technology, civic inclusion and participation". Wilhelm (2000) equally argued that social and political problems cannot be solved by merely introducing technology into the process of engaging them. Heeks (2001:3) even observed provocatively that "most e-governance initiatives fail".Perhaps, the problems currently faced in Africa

and by Africans should not be over-celebrated. However, this should not be an excuse for inertia. The processes leading to the winning of the 2008 elections by Obama should force us to rethink the place of e-democracy. Obama's campaign team took advantage of the internet to raise campaign funds. In the process it was able to reach a wider spectrum of supporters.

The least that can be done here is to encourage African governments to invest more in e-governance. The problems now faced by e-governance in the African continent can be solved by integrating e-democracy processes within broader constitutional structures and development . The capacity of state officials and citizens must be built in this respect. The human rights and pro-democracy groups working on the promotion of e-governance need more international support in order to attain their goals. If the government is not doing what they do, we cannot expect same government to provide these NGOs support for achieving their objectives. However, the activities of these NGOs must follow best practice guidelines in terms of enabling individuals' voices to be heard and not lost. The NGOs must be objective in terms of not promoting sectional interests. They must work towards ensuring that the systems they put in place are accessible to a broad spectrum of citizens. They must encourage feedbacks. The efforts of these NGOs would however amount to naught if the government fails to provide them feedbacks in terms of improvement of political performance.

REFERENCES

Albert, I.O. and D. Marco (2007), Animus and Apologia: Campaign advertorials and the gamble for power in the 2003 and 2007 elections in Nigeria, Abuja: IDASA.

Albert, I.O. [2008], "Whose deliberative democracy: A critique of online public discourses in Africa", Paper presented at the 12th General Assembly of CODESRIA, Yaounde, Cameroun, 7-11 November.

Castells, M (1999), *The information age: Economy, society and culture*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Caston, A and D. Tapscott (1992), The paradigm shift, New York: McGraw-Hill

Clift, S. (2002), "The future of e-democracy", Democracy Online Newswire, http://www/e-democracy.org

Docktor, R. (2001), "Accelerating e-government..E-readiness at work", Paper presented at the Regional workshop on building e-government in Africa

http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/CAFRAD/UNPAN006617.pdf

Economic Intelligence Unit (2007), *The 2007 e-readiness rankings*, The Economist.

Economic Intelligence Unit (2007), *The 2008 e-readiness rankings*, The Economist.

Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2004), Democratic reform in Africa: The quality of progress, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Heeks, R. (2001), "Understanding e-governance for development", i-Government working paper series, Paper no. 11, Manchester: Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester, http://www.man/ac.uk/idpmidpm_dp.htm.

Holmes, D. (2001), E-gov: E-business strategies for government, London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Ifinedo, P. (2005), "E-government initiative in a developing country: Strategies and implementation in Nigeria", in M. Head (ed.), *Proceedings of the 26th McMaster world congress on electronic business*, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, January 19-21 pp.1-11.

Ifinedo, P (2005b), "Measuring Africa's e-readiness in the global networked economy: A nine-country data analysis", *International Journal of Education and Development using Informaion and Community Technology* (IJEDICT), Volume 1 Number 1, pp53-71.

Miller, J. (1999), "Entering the information age: Setting priorities in South Africa", Paper presented at the 2nd International Al Shaam conference on information technology, Damascu, Syria, 26-29 April,

Molla, A. (2000), "Downloading or uploading? The information economy and Africa current status", *Information for Development*, Volume 9 pp.205-221.

Neff, D. (1998), *The knowledge economy*, Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann

Norris P. (2001), Digital divide? Civic engagement, information poverty and the internet worldwide, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Odedra, M et al (1993), "Sub-Saharan Africa: A technological desert", *Communication of the ACM*, Volume 36 Number 2 pp.25-29.

Odinkalu, C.A. (2008), "Freedom of information in Nigeria: Perspectives, problems and prospects", *The Nation*, November 18 p. A4.

Okot-Uma, Rogers W.O (2000), Electronic governance: Re-inventing good governance, London: Commonwealth Secretariat.

Okpaku, J. [ed.] [2003], *Information and communication technologies for African development: An assessment of progress and challenges ahead*, ICT Task Force Series 2.New York: United Nations ICT Task Force.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2003), Promise and problems of e-democracy: Challenges   of   online   citizen   engagement,   Paris: OECD, http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/9/11/35176328.pdf

Tankoano, J. (2001), "E-readiness in Africa: ICT infrastructures for e-governance", Paper presented at the Regional workshop on building e-government in Africa

http://egov.sonasi.com/repository/e-readiness-in-africa-ict-infrastructures-for-e-governance/download.

Turner, C. (2001), *The information E-economy:Business strategies for competing in the global age*, London: Kogan Page Limited.

Woherem, E.E. (1996), "Strategy for indigenization of information technology in Africa", in Odedra-Straub, M. (ed.), *Global information technology and socio-economic development*, New Hampshire: Ivy League Publishing, pp.70-80

World   Economic   Forum   (2002),   "The   networked   readiness   index   rankings   2003, http://www.weforum.org, accessed November 2, 2008.

WSIS (2004), *The World Summit on the Information Society*, http://www.itu.int/wsis/ (accessed November 2 2008).