SAYDi
SAVING AFRICAN YOUTHS DREAM INITIATIVE

Policy Brief for SAYDi

From Hashtags to Policy:
How AI and Digital Platforms Can Transform Youth Political Engagement in Nigeria

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Who we are

Saving African Youths Dream Initiative *(SAYDi)* is a youth-led nonprofit committed to promoting good governance, gender inclusion, and social justice. We advance effective education, democratic participation, and community-driven development through research, advocacy, and technology-powered solutions. SAYDi empowers marginalized voices and fosters inclusive systems that leave no one behind.

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Executive Summary

The youths of Nigeria have demonstrated their political power through digital activism, notably during the **#EndSARS movement.** However, while social media campaigns amplify voices, they often fail to translate into policy changes. Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers a powerful tool to bridge this gap by enhancing voter education, combating misinformation, and structuring digital advocacy into actionable policy demands. This policy brief explores how AI and digital platforms can revolutionize youth political engagement. It also presents policy recommendations, including **AI-driven civic education initiatives, digital advocacy platforms, fact-checking mechanisms, and structured social media integration into policymaking processes.**

Introduction

The Power of a Hashtag

On October 3, 2020, a viral video[1] surfaced showing the brutal killing of a young man by officers of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). In a matter of hours, the hashtag #EndSARS trended globally, igniting one of Nigeria's largest youth-led protests. Social media became the battlefield, with AI-powered tools analyzing police brutality reports and rallying thousands to the streets. **The protests resulted in the government disbanding SARS**, but deeper systemic reforms remained unimplemented till date. This gap between digital activism and legislative impact demonstrates the need for structured political engagement. How can young people in Nigeria ensure that their digital voices lead to real policy change? **AI-driven solutions can provide a framework for sustained youth participation in governance beyond momentary social media activism.**

1 https://web.facebook.com/share/v/1DWFDFEg2F/

The Current Land scape

Youth, Politics, and Digital

Influence The present reality is that young people in Nigeria are more politically aware and digitally connected than ever before. From Twitter spaces to WhatsApp broadcasts, digital platforms have become the battleground for political discourse, activism, and civic engagement. AI and digital tools are reshaping how young people consume information, mobilize for change, and demand accountability from political leaders. However, the digital space is also filled with challenges such as misinformation, online censorship, and algorithmic biases, creating a complex environment for youth participation in governance.

Young Nigerians have shown an incredible ability to harness social media for political mobilization. A prime example is the #EndSARS movement in 2020, which started as a Twitter hashtag and quickly evolved into one of the largest youth-led protests in Nigeria's history. AI-driven sentiment analysis tools helped activists gauge public reactions, while digital platforms like Facebook and Instagram Live provided real-time coverage, countering state-controlled narratives. The decentralized nature of the protest, facilitated by AI-enhanced communication tools like WhatsApp auto-responders, allowed young people to organize without a single leader. This approach, arguably, frustrated the efforts of

the government to suppress it. Could this be an advantage of the absence of a leader? One may wonder.

This digital awakening carried over into the 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria, where youth political engagement reached new heights. Social media influencers, online political commentators, and tech-savvy volunteers used AI tools to track election results, debunk misinformation, and organize voter education campaigns. Platforms like Yiaga Africa and CivicHive deployed AI-powered chatbots to answer voter questions, while fact-checking groups like Dubawa used machine learning algorithms to detect false claims made by political candidates. For the first time, digital engagement shifted from mere online debates to real-world voter participation, with over 40% of newly registered voters being between the ages of 18 and 34.

However, this shift also exposed the vulnerabilities of digital political engagement. AI-driven misinformation campaigns became rampant, with deep-fake videos and manipulated images misleading voters about candidates' stances and electoral processes. The Oxford-English dictionary defines a "deep-fake" as:

"Any of various media, esp. a video that has been digitally manipulated to replace one person's likeness convincingly with that of another, often used maliciously to show someone doing something that he or she did not do."

For instance, a widely circulated AI-generated voice recording falsely accused a leading presidential candidate of making divisive statements, leading to unwarranted online outrage. This showcased the double-edged nature of AI in politics. While it can be used to enhance truth, it can also be weaponized to distort reality.

Beyond misinformation, government regulation and digital repression continue to threaten online political engagement. The Nigerian government has a history of attempting to control online spaces, as seen in the 2021 Twitter
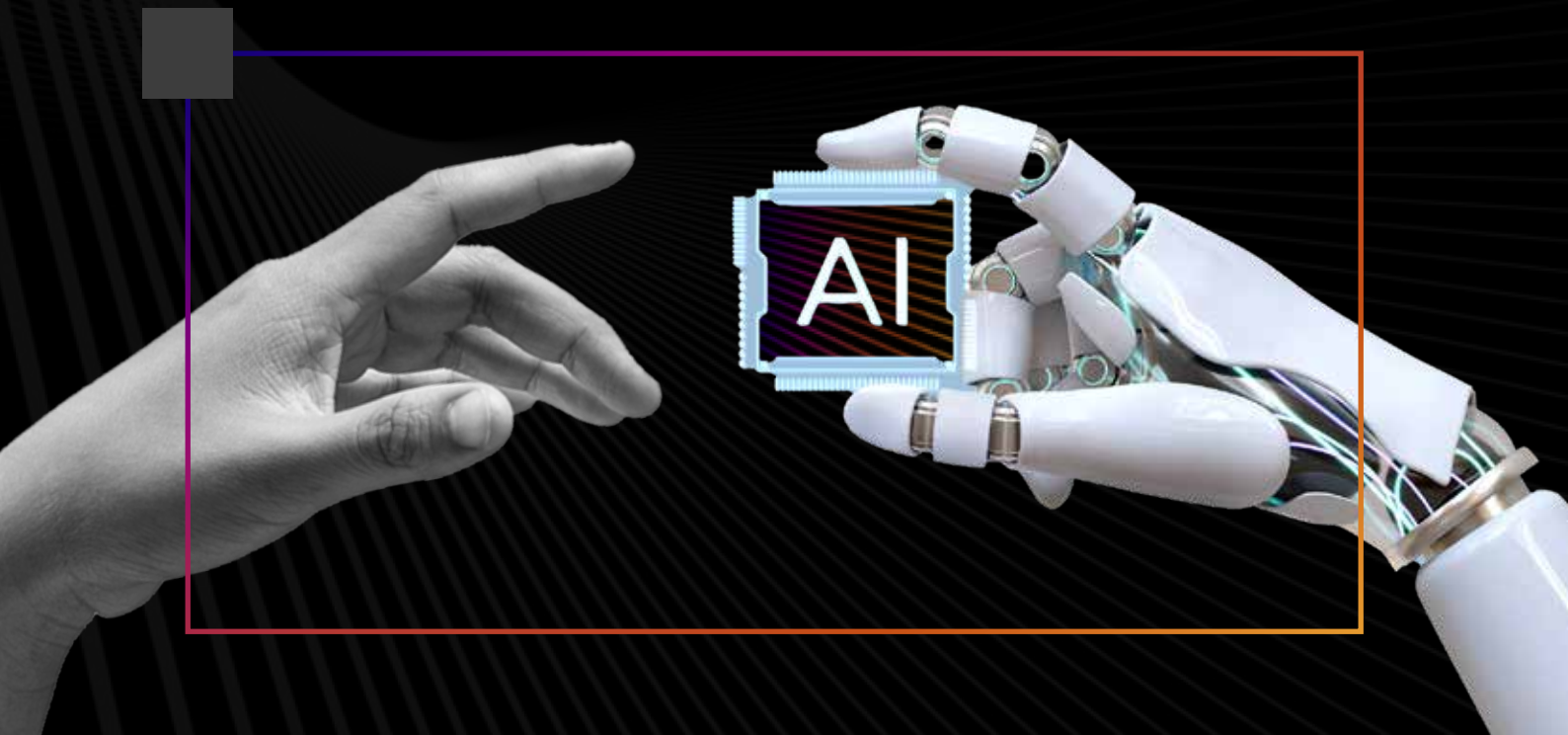
ban[2], which lasted for seven months and crippled digital activism. In the lead-up to the 2023 presidential elections, there were rumors of internet shutdowns and increased surveillance on opposition supporters, raising fears of digital suppression. AI-based monitoring systems, which the government claimed were for "national security," were suspected of being used to track and silence dissenting voices.

Despite these challenges, AI and digital platforms remain the strongest tools for youth political engagement in Nigeria. Young content creators have turned to platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram to simplify political information, making governance issues more relatable. For example, influencers like Debo Adebayo (Mr. Macaroni) and Aisha Yesufu have used their digital presence to educate the youth on political rights, voter participation, and government accountability. Their AI-boosted content —optimized through machine learning algorithms— ensures wider reach, pushing civic education beyond the traditional media landscape.

At the same time, AI-powered civic tech innovations are helping to bridge the gap between political promises and accountability. Platforms like BudgIT use AI algorithms to analyze government budgets exposing financial discrepancies and highlighting wasteful spending. Similarly, Tracka, an AI-enhanced platform, allows citizens to monitor government projects, ensuring that political promises translate into real development. These tools have given young Nigerians an unprecedented level of oversight over government activities, reducing the traditional opacity surrounding governance.

However, not all Nigerian youths have access to these digital advancements. The digital divide remains a major barrier, especially for young people in rural areas, conflict zones, and low-income communities. In states like Borno, Katsina, and Zamfara, where insurgency has disrupted infrastructure, many young people still struggle with poor internet connectivity and high data costs. This exclusion means that while urban youth in cities like Lagos and Abuja are actively

2 BBC. Nigeria's Twitter ban: Government orders prosecution of violators.
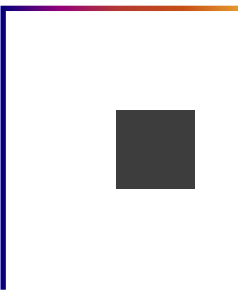https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-57368535

engaging with AI-driven political content, millions of others remain disconnected from digital governance conversations.

Moreover, algorithmic biases on social media platforms pose another challenge. AI-driven content moderation policies, often set by foreign tech companies, sometimes unfairly restrict Nigerian political content while allowing government-backed misinformation to spread. In the 2023 presidential elections, multiple reports3 surfaced about opposition figures having their content flagged or taken down, while state-sponsored narratives remained untouched. This raises concerns about how AI moderation decisions affect political discourse and whether they reinforce existing power imbalances.

The current landscape of youth political engagement in Nigeria is defined by both opportunities and threats. AI and digital platforms have empowered young Nigerians to become more politically active, more informed, and more vocal in holding leaders accountable. However, they also face obstacles such as misinformation, censorship, the digital divide, and algorithmic bias. Moving forward, ensuring that AI is used to enhance, rather than restrict, democratic participation will be crucial in shaping the future of youth engagement in governance.

Barriers to Youth Political Engagement in Nigeria:
The AI Perspective

Despite the transformative potential of AI and digital platforms, several challenges hinder young Nigerians from fully leveraging these tools for political engagement.

One major barrier is government censorship and digital repression. A clear example is the Twitter ban in Nigeria (2021) after young activists used the platform to mobilize during the #EndSARS protests against police brutality. AI-driven misinformation detection tools, campaign tracking bots, and online political discourse suddenly became inaccessible. Many young Nigerians resorted to VPNs, but the restriction significantly stifled their political engagement and limited the reach of grassroots movements.

4 Institute for Security and Technology. https://securityandtechnology.org/blog/qa-hannah-ajakaiye/

Another pressing challenge is the spread of misinformation and deep-fakes, which AI tools can either combat or exacerbate. For instance, during the 2023 general elections, several AI-generated deepfake videos and manipulated audio clips falsely portrayed candidates making controversial statements.4 These false narratives spread rapidly on WhatsApp and Twitter, misleading voters and undermining trust in digital activism. Young fact-checkers, like those from Dubawa and the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development (CJID), worked tirelessly to debunk misinformation, but the damage had often already been done.

Lastly, lack of trust in digital political processes discourages youth from meaningful engagement. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) to increase election transparency,5 but the delayed upload of 2023 presidential election results led to widespread skepticism. Young Nigerians who had been mobilized through platforms like Yiaga Africa and Enough is Enough (EiE Nigeria) felt betrayed by the system, leading to voter apathy in subsequent elections.

These barriers highlight the urgent need for policies that protect digital spaces, enhance media literacy, improve internet accessibility, and restore trust in online political processes.

5 Punch Newspapers. BVAS, IREV enhance electoral transparency, not scams –
INEC https://punchng.com/bvas-irev-enhance-electoral-transparency-not-scams-inec/

The Role of AI in Enhancing Youth Political Engagement

Artificial Intelligence has the potential to redefine political engagement for young Nigerians in several ways:

AI-Powered Voter Education:

Many young Nigerians lack information on voter registration and election processes. AI-powered chatbots, such as the U.S.-based HelloVote,6 have increased voter engagement by providing automated responses to voting-related questions. A similar tool in Nigeria could deliver real-time, accessible civic education in local languages.

Sentiment Analysis for Policy Making:

AI can analyze public sentiment on political issues. In India, AI-powered tools helped shape government responses during the COVID-19 crisis by tracking social media discussions. Nigeria could adopt a similar model to analyze youth concerns and guide policy decisions.

Predictive Analytics for Election Campaigns:

AI can forecast voter turnout trends, helping electoral bodies tailor awareness campaigns. AI models in the U.S. increased youth voter registration by 12% in 2020. A localized version could address Nigeria's low voter turnout.

Fact-Checking and Combating Misinformation:

AI-driven fact-checking platforms like Dubawa7 and Africa Check8 help combat fake news. AI algorithms can detect deep-fakes and misinformation campaigns, ensuring young people engage with verified information.

6 https://www.hello.vote/
7 https://dubawa.org/
8 https://africacheck.org/

Case Studies:

Young Nigerians Leveraging AI and Digital Platforms for Political Change

1. **Hamzat Lawal and Follow The Money Initiative –** This civic tech initiative uses AI and data analytics to track government spending and demand accountability. It has successfully exposed cases of mismanaged public funds, ensuring government interventions reach intended beneficiaries.[9]

2. **BudgIT Nigeria:** AI-Powered Policy Advocacy – This platform simplifies budget data using AI to track government expenditures and increase financial transparency, leading to policy reforms.[10]

3. **Rinu Oduala and Digital Activism –** A key figure in #EndSARS, Oduala uses AI-powered sentiment analysis and advocacy tools to track police reforms and sustain political pressure.

Policy Recommen dations:

Making AI and Digital Platforms Work for Nigerian Youthipsum

To harness AI for youth political engagement, the government must encourage public-private partnerships to develop AI-driven civic engagement platforms. These platforms should integrate voter education tools, real-time policy tracking, and AI-powered petition systems, ensuring that digital activism leads to tangible governance reforms. Additionally, AI-backed sentiment analysis should be institutionalized within government agencies to monitor youth concerns and respond proactively to pressing social issues.

Another crucial step is the establishment of a nationwide fact-checking initiative powered by AI to combat misinformation. This initiative should collaborate with civil society organizations, ensuring that young people have access to verified political content. Furthermore, digital literacy programs should be expanded to rural areas, ensuring that AI-driven political tools are accessible to all Nigerian youths, not just those in urban centers.

Electoral commissions should also leverage AI for predictive analytics to enhance voter mobilization. AI can help identify regions with low engagement and tailor voter education campaigns accordingly. AI-powered election monitoring tools should be deployed to track electoral malpractice, increasing public trust in the voting process. Lastly, structured government engagement with social media activism should be formalized. Policymakers should establish AI-powered dashboards that analyze trending political issues, ensuring that the concerns of Nigerian youths are translated into parliamentary debates and legislative action.

9 https://followthemoneyng.org/about-us/
10 https://budgit.org/bimi-unveiled-a-new-era-of-ai-driven-governance-and-open-data-in-nigeria/

Conclusion:

The Future of Youth Political Engagement in Nigeria

The youths of Nigeria have already proven that they are not just the future of the country but the present. From hashtags to policy debates, from viral campaigns to real-life protests, and from digital activism to the ballot box, young people are showing that they will not be silenced or sidelined. AI and digital platforms have given them a megaphone, a rallying point, and a weapon against political apathy. But the road ahead, unfortunately, is not smooth.

We need to tell ourselves the truth. Technology alone would not fix Nigeria's political system. AI and digital platforms are powerful tools, and that is exactly what they are: tools. What matters is how we use them. Right now, misinformation, digital censorship, and the widening gap between connected and unconnected youths threaten to limit the impact of these tools. A tweet can trend today and be forgotten tomorrow. A viral campaign can shake the system but fail to translate into real policy changes. So, while AI can amplify voices, it is up to young Nigerians to ensure that those voices echo beyond the internet and into real governance spaces.

More importantly, youth political engagement must extend beyond election seasons. Digital activism is powerful, but it needs to be backed by consistent participation in policy discussions,
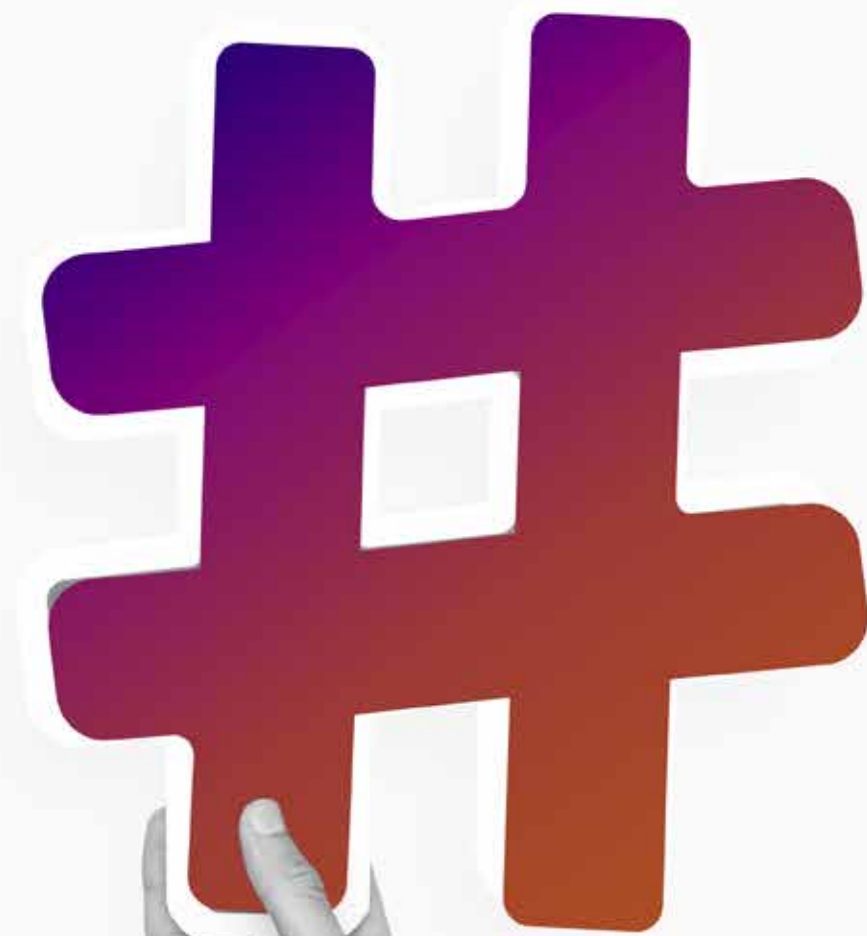
community organizing, and civic education. If young Nigerians truly want to shape the future, they must demand more than just better candidates during elections. They must demand better governance every single day. This means holding

leaders accountable after they have won and ensuring that the promises made online are fulfilled in real life.

At the end of the day, the power of AI and digital platforms depends on the people using them. If young Nigerians remain engaged, informed, and committed to change, then the hashtags, the live streams, the AI-powered fact-checking tools will all mean something. It would not just be the traditional noise on the internet but the fuel for that political transformation that Nigeria desperately needs. And that transformation would not happen in some distant future because it has already begun. The question is: Will we keep pushing forward, or will we let the momentum die?

The answer is in our hands.

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