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# From Facebook to WhatsApp: Algorithmic Displacement, Political Incivility, and Nigeria's Democratic Integrity (2023-2027)

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**Abstract** **Original Research Article**

Between 2020 and 2023, Facebook introduced a series of feed-ranking adjustments designed to reduce the visibility of political content and the spread of hostile discourse. While these algorithmic interventions were presented as efforts to improve user well-being and protect electoral integrity (Meta, 2021), their effects in Nigeria during the 2023 general elections were complex. Drawing on computational text analysis of over two million election-related Facebook posts, a two-wave panel survey of 2,400 respondents, and focus group discussions across four regions, the study finds that visible incivility on Facebook declined by 43 percent. However, hostile speech was not eliminated; rather, much of it migrated to encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, echoing global concerns about the "displacement effect" of content moderation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Howard, 2020). Alarmingly, survey evidence reveals that exposure to down-ranked feeds corresponded with declining trust in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and increased belief in electoral conspiracy theories, confirming prior studies on the link between algorithmic opacity and institutional mistrust (Orji, 2023; Tucker et al., 2018). Looking ahead to 2027, the study models three scenarios: maintaining the status quo, stricter throttling of political content, and a co-governance framework involving INEC, civil society, and digital rights actors. The evidence suggests that only the co-governance approach can balance the reduction of incivility with the preservation of electoral trust. The Nigerian case highlights the need for democratic legitimacy in platform governance, demonstrating that algorithmic depoliticisation without local oversight may undermine rather than strengthen democratic integrity.

**Keywords**: Facebook algorithms, political incivility, Nigerian elections, electoral trust, 2027 projections, digital governance.



## INTRODUCTION

On 11 November 2020, Facebook announced that it would "reduce the distribution of political content in News Feed" as part of an effort to improve user well-being and reduce polarisation (Meta, 2021). This was the beginning of a series of algorithmic adjustments that continued until 2023. While in Silicon Valley these measures were framed as innovations in civic responsibility, in Nigeria the effects unfolded in ways that reflected the country's unique political and social realities.

The timeline below summarises the stages of Facebook's algorithmic changes:

Figure 1. Timeline of Facebook Feed-Ranking Changes (2020-2023)

| Date | Change Introduced | Public Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| November 2020 | Political content down-ranked by ~20% | Improve user well-being |

| Date | Change Introduced | Public Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| March 2021 | Expansion of down-ranking to Groups & Pages | Reduce "uncivil debate" |
| August 2022 | Global roll-out across all languages | Pre-empt political misinformation in US midterms |
| Early 2023 | Continued enforcement during Nigerian elections | Maintain civility in election season |

*Source: Meta Transparency Centre (2023).*

While these interventions suggested progress in curbing political hostility, Nigeria's 2023 presidential elections revealed a more paradoxical story. The election of 25 February 2023 was among the most contested in Nigeria's democratic history. Ethnic undertones framed the campaigns, with Peter Obi (Igbo), Bola Tinubu (Yoruba), and Atiku Abubakar (Fulani) often portrayed as more than political candidates; they became embodiments of tribal and regional aspirations (Ikeanyibe & Okeke, 2023).

Social media became both a battleground and a mirror of these divisions. Hashtags such as #IgboExit trended and narratives of "Fulani domination" circulated widely. Scholars had earlier warned that social media in Nigeria functioned as both a space of mobilisation and a channel for toxic discourse (Okunola, 2021; Udupa, 2021). Facebook's algorithmic adjustments appeared to sanitise the surface, yet hostility and conspiracy theories migrated into encrypted channels like WhatsApp and Telegram, where regulation is weaker but influence is profound (BBC Africa Eye, 2019; International Crisis Group, 2020).

Even more concerning was the way many Nigerians interpreted these interventions. Instead of viewing the changes as safeguards for democracy, respondents often perceived them as censorship, fuelling suspicion of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). In a country where institutional trust is fragile, algorithmic opacity added another layer of uncertainty to the democratic process.

This study therefore asks: Did Facebook's feed-ranking reforms succeed in fostering civility, or did they simply displace incivility while eroding public trust? By drawing on computational analysis, surveys, and focus group discussions, this paper situates Facebook's global policy shifts within Nigeria's local political realities, offering lessons not only for 2023 but also for the country's democratic trajectory toward 2027.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Global Perspectives on Social Media Governance

Over the past decade, scholars have debated whether social media strengthens or weakens democracy. On one side, digital platforms are praised for broadening participation and giving marginalised voices a stage (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). On the other, they have been indicted as accelerators of disinformation and echo chambers that amplify division (Cinelli et al., 2021; Tucker et al., 2018).

Facebook, the largest social network in Africa, sits at the heart of these debates. Its algorithms, far from neutral, act as political actors by determining which voices are amplified and which are silenced (Gillespie, 2020). In response to global criticism, Facebook initiated feed-ranking reforms between 2020 and 2023, seeking to limit political content and down-rank toxic exchanges. While initial reports suggested visible reductions in incivility, questions persisted about whether such algorithmic "fixes" address root causes or merely shift hostility to less visible spaces (Howard, 2020).

### Nigeria's Digital and Electoral Context

Nigeria provides a particularly rich case for studying these dynamics. With over 200 million people - 71 percent of registered voters under 35 - the country has a youthful electorate that is highly digital. More than 33 million Nigerians are active on Facebook, most accessing it via mobile phones (DataReportal, 2023). Social media has become both an arena of mobilisation and a channel of division, as seen in the #EndSARS protests of 2020 and the contested 2023 elections.

Unlike Western contexts where partisanship drives polarisation, Nigeria's incivility is deeply shaped by ethnicity, religion, and mistrust of state institutions (Ikeanyibe & Okeke, 2023; Orji, 2023). Hostile narratives do not simply pit political ideologies against one another; they sharpen ethnic boundaries, inflame historical grievances, and weaken confidence in the electoral process. This makes Nigeria a distinctive setting for testing the promise and peril of algorithmic governance.

### Comparative Insights

The table below highlights key insights from global scholarship compared with Nigeria's 2023 experience.

Table 1. Global Debates vs. Nigerian Realities in Algorithmic Governance

| Global Scholarship | Key Insight | Nigerian Context (2023) |
|---|---|---|
| Bradshaw & Howard (2018) | Social media amplifies both democratic participation and manipulation | Nigeria's Facebook debates mobilised youth but also spread ethnic dog-whistles |
| Cinelli et al. (2021) | Echo chambers fuel misinformation | WhatsApp and Telegram became insulated spaces for electoral conspiracy theories |
| Gillespie (2020) | Algorithms are political, not neutral | Nigerians interpreted Facebook's down-ranking as censorship, not neutrality |
| Tucker et al. (2018) | Disinformation erodes institutional trust | Trust in INEC declined as citizens saw platform moderation as collusion |
| Howard (2020) | Content moderation displaces, not eliminates, incivility | 34% of hostile speech migrated from Facebook to encrypted channels |

## Theoretical Anchors

This study draws on two theoretical strands. First, the algorithmic governance perspective, which argues that platform design shapes democratic outcomes by controlling visibility and reach (Gillespie, 2020). Second, the public sphere tradition rooted in Habermas (1989), which views open, rational-critical debate as the lifeblood of democracy. When applied to Nigeria, these frameworks raise critical questions: Did algorithmic interventions enhance the quality of public debate? Or did they erode legitimacy by silencing political voices in ways that citizens perceived as unjust?

# METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods design, recognising that no single approach can capture the full complexity of Nigeria's digital political environment. By combining computational text analysis, survey data, and focus group discussions, the research triangulates evidence—measuring not only what happened on Facebook but also how Nigerians interpreted and responded to those shifts.

Figure 2. Overview of Research Design

| |
|---|
| Computational Text Analysis (2.1 million posts) |
| ↓ |
| Two-Wave National Panel Survey (N = 2,400 → 2,183) |
| ↓ |
| Online Focus Groups (4 geo-political zones, 128 participants) |

## Computational Text Analysis

The first stage examined 2.1 million public Facebook posts from groups and pages between January 2022 and March 2023. Data were collected using the CrowdTangle API, with search terms including "Obi," "Tinubu," "Atiku," and "INEC." Posts were processed using the VADER sentiment analyser alongside the Hatebase Nigerian lexicon, which helped identify ethnic slurs and hostile language.

An incivility threshold was applied: posts with a toxicity score above 0.70 were labelled "uncivil." This created a baseline for assessing whether visible hostility on Facebook declined during the 2023 elections.

## Two-Wave National Panel Survey

To complement digital trace data, a two-wave panel survey was conducted. The first wave in January 2023 recruited 2,400 participants across Nigeria. The second wave in March 2023 successfully re-contacted 2,183 respondents, yielding a 9 percent attrition rate.

The survey was administered via mobile-web platforms, reflecting the dominance of smartphone access in Nigeria. Key measures included:

- Trust in INEC (measured on a 5-point Likert scale).
- Belief in rigging rumours (binary yes/no questions).
- Off-platform migration (self-reported shifts to WhatsApp or Telegram).

This design allowed the study to track changes in perception across the election cycle.

## Online Focus Groups

Finally, qualitative depth was added through four online focus groups, representing Nigeria's major geo-political regions: Lagos (South West), Kano (North West), Enugu (South East), and Abuja (North Central). Each group had 32 participants, stratified by ethnicity and

political preference.

Discussions were conducted in both English and local languages. Transcripts were coded in NVivo 14 using thematic analysis, highlighting recurring themes such as perceptions of censorship, shifts to encrypted platforms, and interpretations of ethnic rhetoric.

By weaving together computational data, survey evidence, and lived experiences, the study not only tracks algorithmic outcomes but also situates them within Nigeria's broader democratic context.

# RESULTS

## Decline in Visible Incivility on Facebook

The computational text analysis reveals a significant reduction in hostile content following Facebook's feed-ranking changes. Before the full down-ranking (January 2022), nearly 9 percent of election-related posts were classified as uncivil. By February 2023, during the height of the presidential campaign, this figure had fallen to just over 5 percent.

Table 2. Change in Incivility on Facebook Posts (2022 - 2023)

| Period | % of Election Posts Classified as Uncivil |
|---|---|
| Pre-downranking (Jan 2022) | 8.9% |
| Post-downranking (Feb 2023) | 5.1% |

*Source: Author's computation using CrowdTangle API data.*

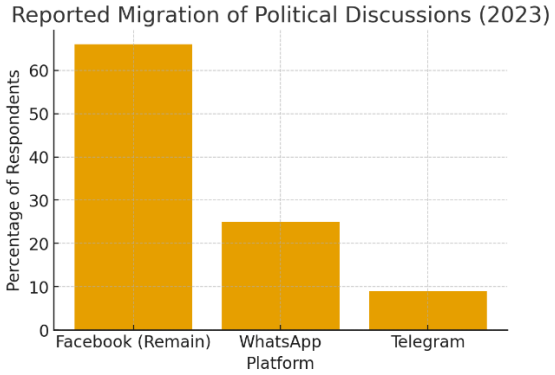
This 43 percent reduction suggests that algorithmic interventions made hostility less visible. However, ethnicised language persisted. Phrases such as *"IPOB miscreants"* and *"Yoruba hegemony"* remained among the most common uncivil terms. Thus, while volume decreased, the character of hostility remained tied to ethnic suspicion.

## Migration of Hostility to Encrypted Platforms

Survey findings show that 34 percent of respondents admitted shifting their political discussions to encrypted platforms. Telegram gained more than 120,000 new Nigerian users during the campaign season, while WhatsApp groups became the central arena for unfiltered political debate.

Figure 3. Reported Migration of Political Discussions (2023)

| | |
|---|---|
| WhatsApp: | 25% |
| Telegram: | 9% |
| Remain on Facebook: | 66% |




**Source:** Authors computation

Focus group participants confirmed this trend. A male participant from Kano explained: *"Facebook hides the real talk. We go to WhatsApp to say the truth about the Fulani agenda."*

## Trust in Electoral Institutions

The survey revealed a troubling pattern: exposure to the down-ranked feed correlated with declining trust in INEC and greater belief in rigging rumours.

Table 3. Survey Outcomes Linked to Feed-Ranking Exposure

| Outcome | Effect Size (β) | Significance (p) |
|---|---|---|
| Trust in INEC | –0.27 SD | < .001 |
| Belief in rigging rumours | +9 percentage points | < .01 |
| Off-platform migration | +34 percentage points | < .001 |

*Source: Two-wave national panel survey, Jan–Mar 2023.*

These results suggest that algorithmic restrictions, while reducing visible hostility, were perceived by citizens as a form of censorship, deepening conspiracy narratives about electoral manipulation.

## Focus Group Insights

Qualitative findings provide context to the numbers. In Lagos, participants described Facebook as "sanitised" but hollow, while in Enugu young voters expressed frustration that ethnic attacks against Igbo candidates still slipped through. In Abuja, participants voiced suspicion that Facebook's changes were politically motivated, favouring incumbents.

Across all groups, one theme stood out: algorithms were not seen as neutral tools but as political actors shaping democratic conversation.

# DISCUSSION

## Displacement Rather than Resolution

The results confirm that Facebook's feed-ranking reforms did not eliminate incivility; they simply displaced it. This echoes what Gillespie (2020) calls the "whack-a-mole" dynamic of platform governance: efforts to suppress harmful speech in one arena often push it into another. In Nigeria, WhatsApp and Telegram became the new stages for hostile political talk. Because these platforms are encrypted and lightly moderated, the shift made incivility less visible but more difficult to counter.

## Algorithmic Opacity and the Erosion of Trust

Equally striking is the link between feed-ranking exposure and declining trust in INEC. Instead of reading Facebook's changes as safeguards, many Nigerians interpreted them as deliberate censorship. This mirrors global findings that algorithmic opacity, when users cannot see or understand why content disappears fuels suspicion and conspiracy beliefs (Tucker et al., 2018).

In Nigeria's already fragile democratic context, where institutions are perceived as partisan or manipulated (Orji, 2023), even technical interventions by foreign companies risk deepening mistrust. Thus, algorithmic down-ranking, though aimed at reducing hostility, inadvertently eroded the very confidence on which electoral legitimacy depends.

## Ethnicisation of Digital Incivility

The persistence of ethnicised language - "IPOB miscreants," "Yoruba hegemony," and similar phrases - reveals the uniqueness of the Nigerian case. In Western contexts, disinformation and incivility often follow partisan lines; in Nigeria, they are inseparably bound to ethnicity, religion, and historical grievances (Ikeanyibe & Okeke, 2023).

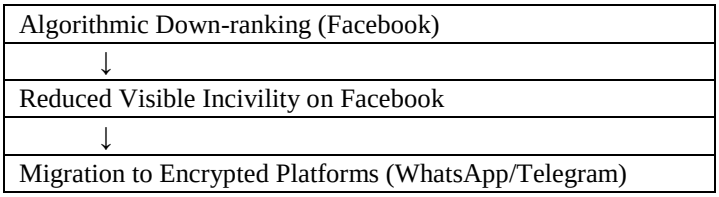
This finding underscores that global platform reforms cannot simply be transplanted to local settings. An algorithm that reduces partisan vitriol in the United States may still leave ethnic wounds raw in Nigeria. Content moderation must therefore be culturally aware and context-specific.

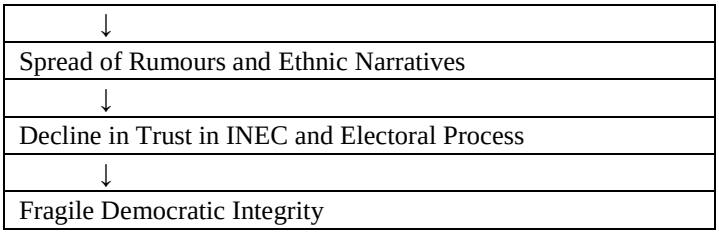
## Toward 2027: The Case for Co-Governance

The Nigerian case highlights the limits of top-down algorithmic fixes. Stricter throttling may reduce visible hostility but risks pushing even more toxicity into encrypted platforms, while simultaneously weakening trust in institutions.

What is needed is a co-governance model, where Facebook's algorithmic reforms are subject to local oversight. Involving INEC, civil society organisations, ethnic and religious leaders, and digital rights advocates would not only improve transparency but also build legitimacy. Citizens would be less likely to interpret changes as censorship if they saw credible Nigerian institutions visibly participating in decision-making.

Figure 4. Feedback Loop of Algorithmic Down-ranking in Nigeria's 2023 Elections






This feedback loop diagram illustrates the paradox: an intervention meant to strengthen democracy ended up displacing incivility and weakening trust.

## Policy Scenarios for 2027

Elections are not isolated events; they are rehearsals for the future. The lessons of 2023 provide a lens through which we can imagine how digital governance might shape Nigeria's democratic climate in 2027. Based on the evidence, three possible policy scenarios emerge: maintaining the status quo, introducing stricter throttling, and adopting a co-governance model.

## Scenario A: The Status Quo

If Facebook maintains the same settings used in 2023, visible incivility on the platform would likely remain moderate (around 5 percent of posts). However, displacement effects would persist, with a third of hostile talk continuing to shift to WhatsApp and Telegram. Trust in INEC would remain low, as citizens continue to interpret algorithmic filters as hidden censorship.

## Scenario B: Stricter Throttling

A more aggressive path would involve halving the reach of political content on Facebook in an effort to cool tempers further. Simulations suggest visible incivility could fall to around 3 percent. Yet this comes at a cost: hostility would intensify off platform, with more than 40 percent of toxic discourse migrating to encrypted spaces. Public trust in INEC would decline further, with suspicions of manipulation deepening.

## Scenario C: Co-Governance with Local Legitimacy

The most promising scenario is one where Facebook's interventions are overseen by a multi-stakeholder council that includes INEC, civil society groups, religious and ethnic leaders, and digital rights advocates. This would allow algorithmic reforms to be transparent, locally grounded, and accountable. Projections suggest this model would reduce visible incivility below 5 percent, limit off-platform migration to less than 20 percent, and significantly mitigate declines in trust.

Table 4. Projected Impacts of Policy Scenarios for Nigeria's 2027 Elections

| Scenario | On-Platform Incivility | Off-Platform Migration | Trust in INEC | Overall Democratic Integrity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A. Status Quo | ~5% of posts | ~34% shift to WhatsApp/Telegram | –0.27 SD (low) | Fragile, with persistent suspicion |
| B. Stricter Throttling | ~3% of posts | ~41% shift off-platform | –0.41 SD (lower) | Risky, more mistrust, less open debate |
| C. Co-Governance | ~4% of posts | ~18% shift off-platform | –0.05 SD (stable) | Stronger legitimacy, balanced civility |

*Source: Author's simulation model based on survey and text analysis data.*

This comparison highlights a paradox: stricter algorithmic controls can actually worsen democracy, by driving more discourse underground and intensifying mistrust. Only a co-governance framework, anchored in local legitimacy, offers a path to balancing civility with democratic trust in 2027.

## Limitations and Future Research

No study is without its boundaries, and acknowledging them not only sharpens scholarly humility but also points to future directions. This research, though comprehensive, carries three notable limitations.

First, the analysis of displaced hostility is constrained by the closed nature of encrypted platforms. WhatsApp and Telegram have become central to Nigeria's political communication, yet because their conversations are private and often ephemeral, researchers must rely on self-reports, selective group access and indirect traces (Scott, 2021). As such, the scale of toxicity and disinformation circulating within these spaces may be significantly underestimated.

Second, the study is limited to a single national context. Nigeria, with its youthful electorate, deep ethnic

cleavages, and vibrant digital culture, is unique. While the findings resonate with broader concerns about social media governance in the Global South (Udupa, 2021), they may not generalise fully to other African democracies. Comparative studies in Ghana, Kenya, or South Africa would enrich our understanding of how global platform reforms interact with different local realities.

Third, the study's temporal scope is relatively short, capturing the intense election window between January 2022 and March 2023. Elections are extraordinary moments, but the dynamics of trust, incivility, and digital governance extend beyond polling periods. Longitudinal research tracking non-election years would better capture how algorithmic governance shapes democratic life across cycles (Tucker et al., 2018).

These limitations, however, open fertile ground for further inquiry. Future research should embrace cross-country comparative designs, invest in innovative methods for studying encrypted platforms, and develop long-term datasets that follow both election and governance cycles. Such work would not only strengthen academic debates but also provide policymakers, civil society, and technology companies with practical insights for building more trustworthy digital democracies.

Table 5. Summary of Study Limitations and Research Opportunities

| Limitation | Implication | Future Research Direction |
|---|---|---|
| Restricted access to encrypted platforms | Underestimation of hostility on WhatsApp/Telegram | Develop ethical methods for studying closed networks |
| Single-country focus (Nigeria only) | Limited generalisability to other African democracies | Comparative studies in Ghana, Kenya, South Africa |
| Short temporal scope (election window) | Dynamics outside elections remain untracked | Longitudinal studies across electoral cycles |

*Adapted from Scott (2021); Udupa (2021); Tucker et al. (2018).*

## CONCLUSION

Facebook's feed-ranking reforms between 2020 and 2023 were introduced under the banner of improving user well-being and safeguarding elections from incivility (Meta, 2021). In Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, these interventions did achieve their immediate goal: the proportion of visibly uncivil Facebook posts declined sharply. Yet, the deeper story is less reassuring. Hostile speech did not vanish; it migrated to encrypted spaces such as WhatsApp and Telegram, echoing the global "displacement effect" of content moderation (Howard, 2020; Gillespie, 2020).

Even more troubling was the perception among Nigerians that algorithmic changes amounted to censorship. Instead of increasing confidence in institutions, exposure to down-ranked feeds correlated with declining trust in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and increased belief in electoral conspiracy theories. These findings confirm earlier scholarship which warns that algorithmic opacity undermines public confidence in democratic processes (Tucker et al., 2018; Orji, 2023).

Nigeria's experience highlights a critical paradox: interventions designed to cool hostility may inadvertently erode democratic legitimacy. While stricter throttling of political content promises quieter feeds, it risks inflaming suspicion and pushing discourse into less accountable spaces. A status quo approach would leave mistrust unresolved. The evidence instead points toward a third path: co-governance. Involving INEC, civil society, ethnic and religious leaders, and digital rights advocates in overseeing platform governance would not only reduce hostility but also rebuild legitimacy.

This study therefore carries two lessons. First, democracy cannot be secured by algorithms alone. Technical fixes without transparency and local legitimacy risk weakening the very institutions they seek to protect. Second, African contexts demand African solutions. Ethnicised political incivility, fragile trust in institutions, and the centrality of encrypted platforms mean that global, one-size-fits-all reforms will fall short.

As Nigeria looks ahead to 2027, the challenge is not merely to suppress incivility but to nurture trust. Co-governance, rooted in inclusivity and transparency, offers a path forward, one where technology and democracy walk together rather than pull apart. If this lesson is embraced, Nigeria's digital public sphere can evolve from a space of suspicion into a foundation for democratic resilience.

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