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Towards Enhancing Citizens Engagement: A Review of Parliamentary Websites in the 36 State Houses of Assembly in Nigeria

Abdulsalam Mustafa, Mahammad Sharifov

*Department of Computer Science and Engineering, Khazar University, Baku, Azerbaijan,
abdulsalam.mustafa@khazar.org & msharifov@khazar.org*

Abstract: Parliaments represent the interests of citizens, and so remain critical to democracy and good governance. Therefore, for effective citizens' engagement, ensuring online presence, and enhancing transparency of internal processes, parliaments' leverage on Information and Communication Technology is of paramount importance globally. This study investigates the contents of official parliamentary websites in the 36 State Houses of Assembly of Nigeria to determine how they facilitate effective engagement between citizens and their elected representatives. The methodology used includes manual testing based on categories and critical sub-factors in line with Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Guidelines. Desk research was also used to determine technical challenges for the implementation of e-parliament. The findings reveal that only 36% of the State Assemblies have official websites. Five are fully functional, and just five state legislatures effectively utilize interactive tools to re-engage the citizens. Results show that 58% of the state legislatures use social media tools such as Facebook and Twitter. The authors conclude that in enhancing civic participation, state legislatures need to provide a relatively open, more responsive, accessible, and interactive website while extending social medial tools.

Keywords: Citizens Participation, Legislature, Social Media, State Assembly, Web Tools.

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1. Introduction

Legislatures are crucial to good governance around the world. The legislature is regarded as one of the critical state institutions of democracy and plays a critical role in legislation, oversight, and representation (Global Centre for ICT, 2016). Their representational role includes ensuring active citizens' participation in the policy-making process. However, in some countries, parliaments are still considered as weak, ineffective, and marginalized (Edigheji, 2006) and have a low-level of

civic participation in the decision-making process. While e-governance involves the rendering of government services and information to the public using electronic means (Nkwe, 2013), e-parliament involves the effective utilization of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) tools and proficiency by the legislature, for a more open, accountable, effective, efficient, and interactive parliament for enhanced citizens' engagement and better representation of the electorates.

Before the revolutionary transformation in communication ushered in by the digital age in the late 1980s, parliamentary communication to citizens was severely limited and mostly unidirectional. This is because proceedings were mostly published in Hansards and kept in archives for the citizens (Leston-Banderia, 2013a). Consultations were mainly through face-to-face interactions, which were expensive, time consuming, and lacked fidelity. This meant that the majority, if not all, citizens could not participate in decision making at the parliamentary level. Essentially, elected representatives could neither connect with the electorates for input or feedback nor inform them of constituency activities.

But since the advent of online portals and websites, there have been tremendous advantages. The online portals and websites have imbued parliaments with more purposive methods of communication, particularly in the face of declining traditional media coverage sites (Leston-Banderia and Thompson, 2013a). Their growing importance also manifests in the rapid increase in visitors to parliamentary websites (Leston-Banderia and Thompson, 2013a). Many scholars have pointed out that the inherent interactivity of the Internet enhances parliamentary activities and democratic practices (Coleman, 2015). The Internet helps to facilitate information and communication between parliamentarians and their representatives through online platforms. The Internet also offers the required platforms for MPs to quickly and regularly communicate through e-mails with their constituents (Leston-Bandeira, 2011). In addition, the Internet enables parliamentary websites to provide impartial and unfiltered parliamentary information to constituents and disseminate large amounts of such information at relatively low costs (Norton, 2007). Furthermore, parliamentary websites enable parliaments to market their image to the public cheaply, quickly, and efficiently (Dai and Norton, 2007). These features facilitate increased transparency in parliamentary activities and also aid the process of legislative scrutiny (Norris, 2001).

With low public trust in elected representatives and parliamentary institutions as a permanent feature (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2013a), parliaments have turned to ICT for enhanced visibility in order to promote greater transparency, more effective representation, and enhance citizens' engagement in the democratic process. Studies have shown that websites promote and make available a large amount of up-to-date information on public decision-making to many citizens at a relatively low cost (Lowatcharin and Meinifield, 2015). However, for legislatures to successfully leverage on ICT tools, they need to fully understand how these tools can be effectively used and their primary role for their websites.

This study aims at evaluating the parliamentary websites of Nigeria's 36 State Houses of Assembly to determine the level of their usages in facilitating communication between citizens and the Members of Parliaments (MP), and evaluating the impact of social media and interactive tools on enhancing citizens' engagement.

2. Literature Review

The main aim of a legislative website is to increase online participation with the constituency; to achieve this, such websites need to be robust and more interactive (Bernardes and Leston-Bandeira, 2015). Websites also facilitate engagement between citizens and their elected representatives by providing them with contact details of MPs and the means for interacting with their representatives. Kingham (2003) states that the greater the public participation, the more representative the government is likely to be. This view seems to be the case in parliaments that are held more accountable by the public and embrace transparency; they are more likely to make decisions in the people's interest.

In recent years, parliaments around the world have enhanced their websites to improve access to legislative information and other parliamentary resources (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2013a; Salgado, 2016). Several parliaments use ICT tools such as e-polling, e-petitions, blogs, fora, chat, etc. in their online portals, to enhance 'Youth Parliament' programs (Papaloi and Gouscos, 2009). Innovative features allow constituents and researchers to locate and utilize detailed information on draft legislation and lawmaking in various ways. These include tracking tools and alerts, apps, the use of open data technology, and different search functions (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2013b). In some cases, information on more than one website is provided where separate sites have been established for different chambers of the parliament (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2013b). This is the case in the websites of US Congress (Senate and House of Representatives), French Parliament (Senate and National Assembly), Austrian Parliament (National Council and Federal Council), Italian Parliament (Senate and Chambers of Deputies), South Africa Parliament (National Assembly and National Council of Provinces), etc.

In legislative websites' design and development, it is important for legislatures to get input from all relevant stakeholders, as they are the end users of the website (Setela and Gronlund, 2006). In the past few decades, websites were solely considered as information platforms and were unidirectional, but in contemporary times, legislative websites have evolved into becoming an essential tool for engaging with the electorates. As Leston-Bandeira and Thompson (2013b) notes, parliaments are encouraged to use the 'three-click rule' to ensure greater accessibility. The three-click rule suggests that users of websites should be able to locate any information with three mouse clicks or less. Web surveys (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2013b; Lee, 2017; Feeney and Welch, 2017) have shown that certain pages such as legislative news or lists of elected representatives are extremely popular and should be promoted on the homepage to enable retrieval of required information with minimum clicks.

In addition, the development and maintenance of parliamentary websites requires a good level of strategic planning and management. As the online face of the institution, it is essential that some degree of website planning is incorporated into a parliament's general strategic plan, so that its importance is recognized at the very highest level of the parliamentary administration (Setela and Gronlund, 2006). When opportunities for citizen-representative engagement are ineffective in affecting government policy or when citizens feel that public institutions do not represent them (Oni et al., 2016), there is a need for innovations to re-engage citizens and relevant stakeholders through the dissemination of information services online and by providing multiple channels for citizen

interaction for better accountability and representation. The successful implementation of e-government requires support from the highest level of government (Wamoto, 2015; The World Bank, 2017), and this is also the case for e-parliament. In extant literature on e-governmental websites, the emphasis has been on the executive arm of state government with little research on assessing the effectiveness of parliamentary websites of Nigeria's state legislatures in providing access to information or on online engagement tools to strengthen democratic transparency and its impact on enhancing citizens engagement.

3. Methodology

An external desk research methodology was employed for this review with a focus on online desk research and government published data. Desk research refers to secondary data or data that can be collected without fieldwork (Jackson, 1994). This most certainly includes searching libraries and the Internet, but it can also include carrying out interviews with experts (Hague et al., 2004). Online and offline documents were consulted to determine the interactive tools used by all of the 36 State Houses of Assembly of Nigeria: official websites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube pages. A manual test and observations based on categories and key sub-factors based on IPU guidelines for parliamentary websites (IPU, 2009) were also used to evaluate the websites for this study. The criteria were grouped into five sub-factors: website structure, social media tools, management and dissemination of legislative information, constituency activities reporting, interactivity, and enhanced web tools.

The study focused on evaluating the following research questions:

- 1) How state legislatures facilitate effective engagement between citizens and their elected representatives?
- 2) What is the impact of online presence of state legislatures on increasing citizens' engagement?

Each sub-factor was allocated marks and computed for each state based on a specific criterion met. The manual evaluation criteria were done using a 5-point scale, 0 being the worst and 4 being the best. The Key Performance Indicators (KPI) is shown in Table 1. Each state is scored between 0 and 5 for each of the criteria and an average score is computed.

Data collection was conducted over a period of 4 months (November 2017 - March 2018) and online data from social media websites covered a period of 4 years (May 2014 - March 2018). In the case of official websites, data was collected from the website inception date to March 2018.

Table 1: Key Performance Indicators (KPI) Scoring

Ratings	Indicators
0	Very Poor
1	Poor
2	Acceptable Level
3	Very Good Level
4	Excellent Level

3.1. Research Limitation

The research achieved its aims, but encountered some limitations. The majority of the state legislatures did not have official websites. Of those that did, only a few were functional. There were also issues with accessibility to data as a result of closed political environments in some states. Therefore, to fully assess the impact of online presence of state legislatures on citizens' engagement, the online desk research was extended to official Facebook and Twitter pages of the state legislatures.

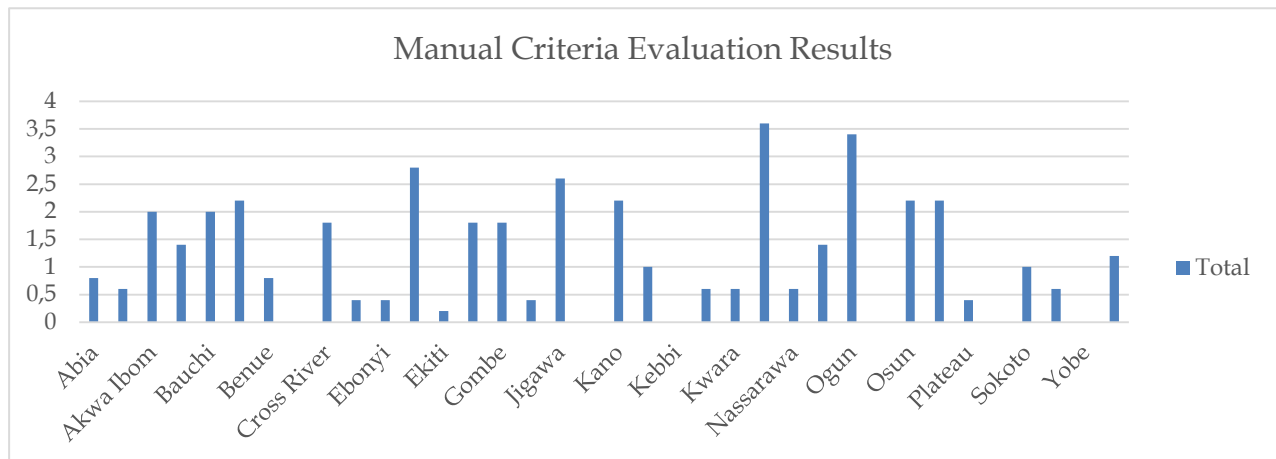
4. Results and Discussion

A comprehensive review of websites of the 36 State Houses of Assembly is aimed at examining the implementation level of the Internet and their commitment towards enhancing citizens' engagement through online portals and social media, while also assessing its impact on increasing citizens' participation in the democratic process. Preparatory desk research was conducted using publications, reports, official government websites, and internal documents supplied by contact persons in the respective departments and organizations.

The data in Chart 1 (below) displays the results of each state legislature based on the manual criteria: website structure (online presence), social media tools, management and dissemination of legislative information, constituency activities reporting, interactivity, and enhanced web tools. Results from the chart showed that Lagos and Ogun scored high with 3.6 and 3.5 respectively out of 4. Edo and Jigawa scored above average with 2.8 and 2.6; while Bayelsa, Kano, Osun, and Oyo with similar scores of 2.2 also scored above average. Akwa-Ibom and Bauchi attained a score of 2, while the rest scored below average except for Borno, Kaduna, Kebbi, Ondo, Rivers, and Yobe that did not attain any score, as they have no online presence (official website or social media accounts).

The official websites, Facebook, and Twitter accounts of the 36 state legislatures in Nigeria were reviewed and some states did not have online presence while some of the websites were inactive. The majority of the states (94%) do not have official Twitter accounts, however, more than half of the states (58%) have official Facebook pages. The study shows that the majority of the state legislatures facilitate effective engagement between citizens and the elected representatives through social media with Facebook (used by 58% of them). A review of the websites of 36 State Houses of Assembly is presented below under different sections.

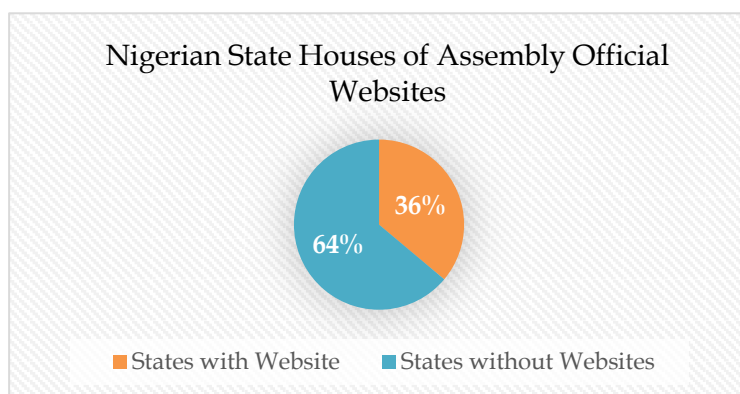
Chart 1: Results of Evaluation based on Manual Criteria



4.1. Official Websites of State Legislature

The results shown in Figure 1 reveal that only 13 (36%) states have official websites, while the remaining 23 (64%) states do not have official websites. Even though 13 State Houses of Assembly have implemented official websites, five (38%) of them are active and functional with basic web features while eight (62%) are inactive with broken links. According to the findings from interviews to support these results, state legislatures have not fully understood the importance of having an online presence in promoting transparency to strengthen democracy and improve citizen engagement.

Figure 1: Nigerian State Houses of Assembly Official websites

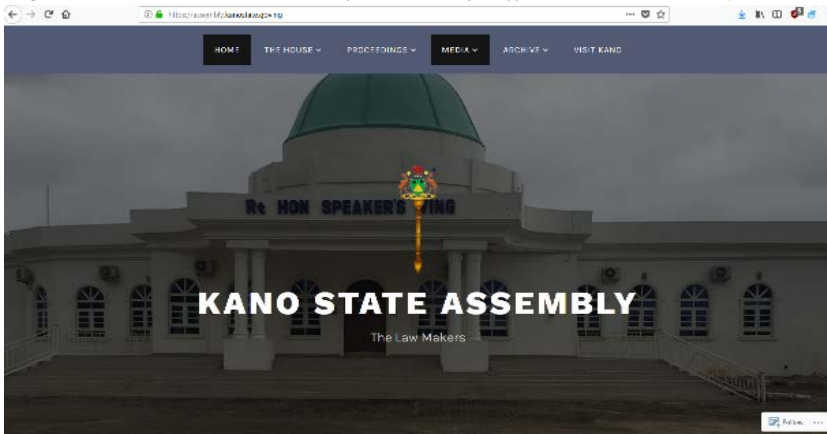


Three websites: Kano, Lagos, and Ogun provide users with advanced features such as archiving, cloud storage, and e-newsletters and scored high in this category. Interestingly, none of the websites have an integrated search tool. Live audiovisual streaming of parliamentary plenary debates is available on the websites of Edo, Lagos, Ogun, and Kano state legislatures. However, it is only functional on the website of the Ogun state legislature. Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 show the websites of Edo, Kano, Lagos, Ogun, and Osun State Houses of Assembly, respectively.

Figure 2: Edo State House of Assembly Official Website (www.edha.gov.ng)



Figure 3: Kano State House of Assembly Official Website (<https://assembly.kanostate.gov.ng>)



Only the Kano State legislative website, presented in Figure 3, is secured and runs on Hypertext Transfer Protocol (HTTPS) for secure Internet connections.

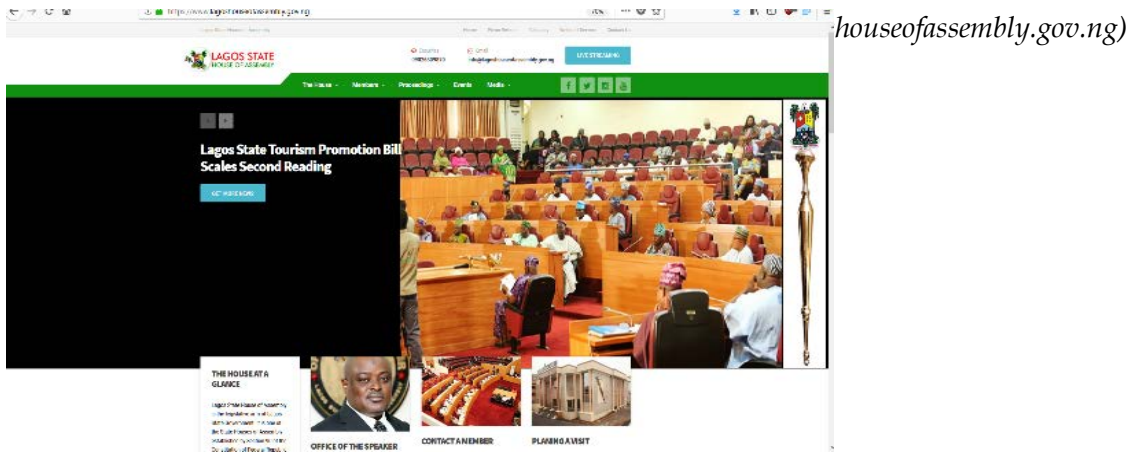


Figure 5: Ogun State House of Assembly Official Website (www.ogha.og.gov.ng)

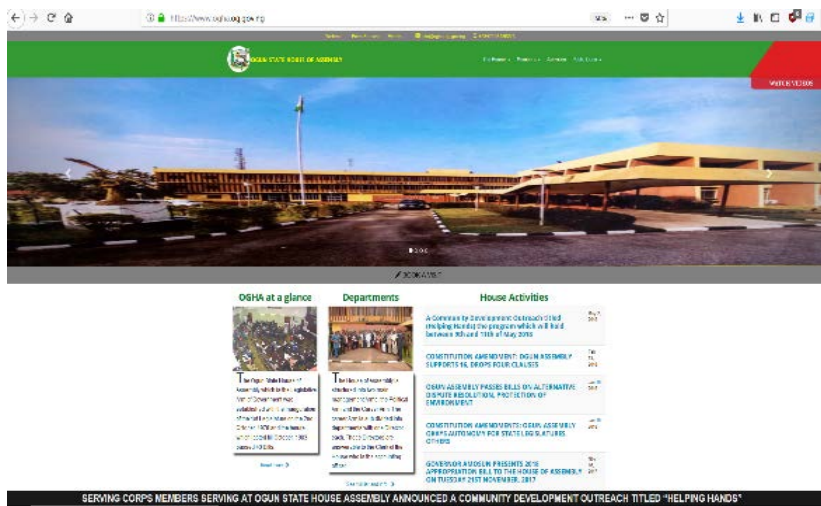
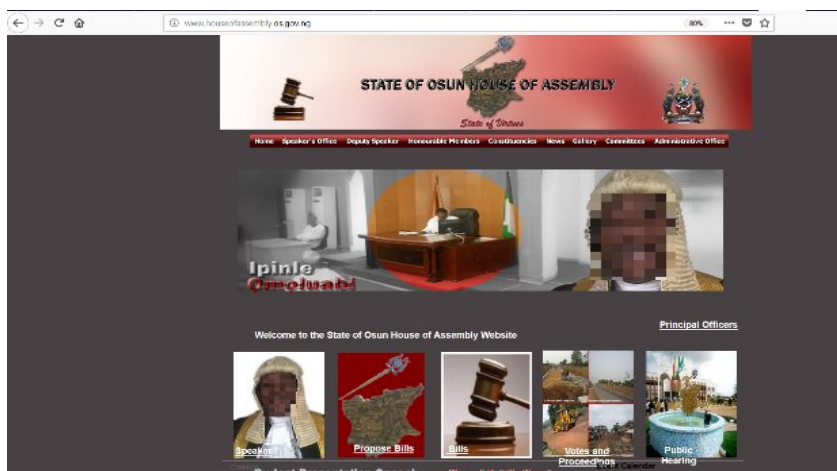


Figure 6: Osun State House of Assembly Official Website (www.houseofassembly.os.gov.ng)

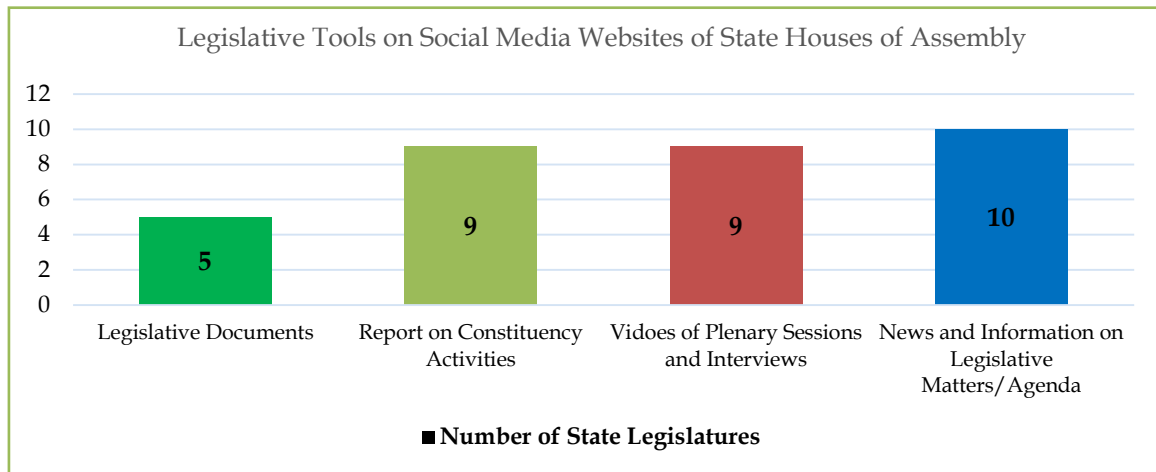


4.2. Social Media Tools

As presented in Figure 7, twenty-one (21) state legislatures have official Facebook pages and scored above average under this section; however, only Lagos that has both a Twitter and Instagram page achieved the highest score in this category. The findings show that 75% of the Facebook pages of state legislatures have improved citizens’ participation, which is evident from the timeline of activities on their Facebook pages. It shows an increasing level of interaction with the electorates over a period of 3 years. However, only five legislative websites that attained high scores have enhanced features for increased citizen participation such as feedback mechanism, contact e-mail, and request for comments facility.

Additionally, the data collected also revealed that 11 (52%) of the 21 official Facebook pages are professionally managed and regularly updated while 10 (48%) are not; this is based on the timeline of activities from May 2014 to March 2018. Lagos is the exception, because it extends to Twitter that is well managed and constantly updated. Also, the Facebook pages of Edo, Katsina, Kwara, Oyo, Osun, Oyo, and Sokoto are not regularly updated and show long periods of inactivity. The Facebook pages of Katsina and Sokoto provide limited coverage of legislative activities and that of Kwara is inactive. Furthermore, Borno has two Facebook pages, and the researchers were unable to confirm the official page of the state legislature.

Chart 2: Nigerian State Houses of Assembly Legislative Tools on Social Media Website



4.3. Legislative Documents and Agenda

The study reveals that the Facebook pages of 5 (24%) State Houses of Assembly: Akwa-Ibom, Anambra, Bayelsa, Enugu, and Lagos cover the legislative agenda of their Houses and provide copies of legislative documents in multimedia (jpeg) formats. However, not all of the legislative documents are provided, and it was discovered that some of the multimedia used are of low quality as highlighted in the case of the Anambra State. The remaining 31 states scored below average in this criterion.

4.4. Constituency Activities

As shown in Chart 2, report of constituency activities is covered by only 9 (43%) state legislatures on their Facebook pages: Akwa-Ibom, Bayelsa, Cross River, Enugu, Gombe, Jigawa, Lagos, Niger, and Ogun with 27 states scoring below average under this benchmark. Jigawa scored high in this criterion, as its Facebook page provides constituency activities reported in Hausa, the local dialect.

4.5. Legislative Matters

News and reports on issues related to the legislature are covered by the Facebook pages of 10 (48%) states: Akwa-Ibom, Anambra, Bayelsa, Cross-River, Enugu, Gombe, Jigawa, Lagos, Niger, and Ogun. Twenty-six (26) states scored below average in this category.

4.6. Electronic Media and Multimedia Content

Anambra state legislature provides live video coverage and archive video resources on its Facebook page, in contrast Oyo Facebook page has a YouTube video link embedded. The Facebook pages of Anambra, Bayelsa, Cross River, Jigawa, Lagos, Niger, and Ogun (33%) provide basic multimedia content—some of which are outdated and archival materials. Ogun supports live streaming on its website and through its YouTube channel, but users can only access archive videos

4.7. Citizens Engagement: Feedback and Interactivity Tools

Results showed that Edo state legislature scored low because it did not have a contact page or extended citizens engagement tools. While all MPs contact details are displayed, the section on constituency and representatives has an inactive link that redirects to a different section of the website. From the findings, 80% of the 5 active websites: Kano, Lagos, Ogun, and Osun provide limited feedback and interactivity tools and scored above average. However, Lagos and Ogun (10%) scored high, and so extend Facebook and Twitter social media on their websites. The study further reveals that Lagos and Ogun social media accounts are regularly updated and frequently inform the electorates on recent legislative activities, draft legislations, bill progression, and budget processes.

Figure 7: Nigerian State Houses of Assembly Statistics



From our evaluation, the following are presented below:

- 48% of the active official websites and 48% of the Facebook pages were not regularly updated;
- 90% of websites do not provide access to all relevant legislative documents and verbatim reports of chamber proceedings;
- 90% of functional websites have poor archival storage system;
- 75% of state legislatures do not provide information on constituency activities;
- 70% of the activities and reports on social media are centered around the speakers of state legislatures with less focus on other MPs;
- 38.4% of active websites do not conform to heuristic design and navigation principles;
- 80% of the websites were deficient in terms of interactivity. There is no support for e-petitions, e-consultations, online survey, or online post;
- There are no active search facilities on all the websites reviewed;
- News articles, reports, and documents on 70% of the websites were not dated to assist users in identifying the date of upload (timeline of events);
- The websites with multimedia content were heavy and slow when loading;
- Lack of good contacts to enable feedback from citizens; and
- A total of 14 states (38.9%) rely on the state government portals to provide all information on the state legislatures. However, this system does not guarantee independence of the legislature, as this practice enables state government (executive) to exercise full control over information provided on the websites over which the legislature has neither ownership nor control.

Based on the research results, the researchers suggest the following recommendations that could help to successfully address the concerns raised from the evaluation:

- Design and development of an interactive legislative website should be incorporated into the strategic plan of state legislatures with lack of online presence;

- It is important for the legislature to determine the primary role of their website and the specific image of parliament for online projection (Leston-Bandeira and Thompson, 2013b);
- To modernize and facilitate citizens' access to parliamentary information, there is need to develop video and multimedia content to provide live broadcast of public seating and educational videos on the legislature and integrate them in the search engine;
- The need to constantly update the legislative websites and Facebook pages with legislative documents and activities, at least, 3 times a week (before the end of each legislative day) while extending twitter (Sorensen, 2016). This will assure users of the website that the information is accurate and up-to-date;
- Provide access to all relevant legislative documents that are always available to users with search functionality and meta-data;
- The need for a more responsive, user-friendly, and easy to navigate website based on heuristic principles (IPU, 2009; IPU 2016). There is need for input from all stakeholders (users of the website) at the design and development phases;
- Websites should integrate interactive tools and applications to encourage engagement: integrate Web 3.0 tools on the website to promote interactivity, smart tags, and web semantics (including XML) to enable users to generate, share (download), and connect content through search and analysis based on the ability to comprehend the meaning of words (Vieira and Isaias, 2015);
- To achieve independence of legislature and for greater visibility, state legislatures should not solely rely on official portals of the state to cover information on the legislature. Developing and maintaining their official websites and online portals would enable state legislatures to take ownership of their websites;
- YouTube parliamentary channel will provide a wider reach to citizens as they can be viewed on portable devices with less bandwidth;
- It is important for website content to be mobile-friendly. Studies have shown that the majority of citizens access online sites through web-enabled mobile devices, for faster loading speeds and compatibility through code optimization (Feeney and Brown, 2017; Lee 2017; Nabatchi and Leighninger, 2015; The World Bank, 2017); and
- Provide an online platform for constituents to contact MPs through constituency office or legislative switchboard numbers and integrate feedback mechanisms such as e-letters, e-consultations, and e-petitions for greater transparency. This will also provide an online platform for public deliberation to support offline platform.

5. Conclusion

The World e-Parliament Report of 2016 highlighted some of the critical challenges confronting parliaments in effectively utilizing ICT technologies. Some of them include insufficient technical knowledge among legislative staff, limited resources for legislatures and lack of ICT infrastructure such as essential features like the Internet, an intranet, computers, network devices, backup software, and digitizing systems (among others) (Global Centre for ICT, 2016).

The outcomes of this study suggest that the challenges identified are also confronting majority of the state legislatures in Nigeria, in addition to a general lack of political will. This conclusion is a result of consultations with the staff of some of these state legislatures. Additionally, it was also highlighted that without support from the management, an innovation is less likely to be adopted, as management-support provides a positive environment for the implementation of e-parliament. E-parliament has the potential to enhance the internal working process of parliament. Also, a parliamentary website has the ability to increase interactivity with citizens and strengthen democratic transparency, thereby making the parliament more accountable to its citizens (IPU, 2016). The majority of the state legislative websites were inactive and that posed a problem to the researchers in fully accessing the impact of each website on enhancing citizens' engagement.

Therefore, the study was unable to successfully address the question: What is the impact of online presence of state legislatures on increasing citizens' engagement?

There is a need to extend the research to determine the distinct technical challenges for each state legislature and document the factors for their inability to fully implement interactive websites (online presence): provide interactivity tools, feedback mechanisms, and extend social media towards increasing citizens participation in decision making and legislative activities. Future research should also attempt to assess the level of e-readiness of Nigerian state legislatures towards successfully implementing e-parliament.

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About the Authors

Abdusalam Mustafa

Abdusalam Mustafa, is a researcher at the Department of Computer Science & Engineering, Khazar University. He holds both a BSc and MSc Computer Science from University of Hertfordshire, UK. His research interests lie in e-democracy: ranging from concept to design and implementation, e-government, digital transformation, citizens' participation, big data, IoT, mobile networks and computer security. Abdusalam also works with National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, Nigeria National Assembly.

Mahammad Sharifov, PhD

Mahammad Sharifov holds a BSc Computer Mathematics and MSc Control of Automatic Systems both from Azerbaijan Technical University and a PhD in Computer Engineering from Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences. His research interest lies in e-government, web resources, Impact and challenges of open and distance e-Learning and Learning Management Systems (LMS) for higher education. Mahammad was a research fellow at Hradec Kralove University, Czech Republic and is currently Head, Computer Science and Engineering Department and Head, Internet Education Centre at Khazar University, Azerbaijan.