

Web plus SMS for Elections
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Elections are important building block for democracy and free society. The need for contribution by the media to ensure free and fair elections becomes imperative. All over the world the media is playing a very important role in ensuring free and fair elections working with all stakeholders across board.

The media can strengthen an electoral process by providing independent information through impartial coverage. Three important elements come into play, access to information from the political process, ability to undertake investigate journalism and document lessons and experience from the electoral process.

There are a lot of challenges and problems facing the media in the area of election coverage. Key among them is lack of access to information in real time, lack of capacity to under investigative journalism surrounding elections, inability to make balance and ensure fair reporting, incorporating content from their audience in their final report.

The flagship of our election project is a web portal integrating SMS with relevant information about the elections contributed by journalists and ordinary citizens. The use of SMS to report and monitor the elections is unique and innovative. We established a network of professional and citizen journalists who use mobile to contribute content, which was, distribute using an SMS gateway to subscriber base of mobile users from the portal. We trained the journalist on election reporting and then how to use the platform. By using SMS to email, content contributors published straight to the web from their mobile phones as well. By incorporating the use of Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS) we empowered our correspondents to post pictures from remote areas via phone during the electoral process. The project is designed to use SMS in the following ways:

- Sending out election results and news to subscribers
- Receiving news updates from our correspondents spread throughout the country via SMS
- Integrating SMS to email for areas without email access
- Use of SMS as a polling tool
- SMS campaign especially in the promotion of peaceful elections

Development of the portal was done separately and then integrated with the SMS platform to serve as an online platform for the elections - providing detailed information on the candidates (profiles) and main issues connected with elections. During our elections coverage we made use of frontlineSMS for incoming and outgoing SMS, text for outgoing SMS included communication with our journalists and monitors, journalists mostly receive alert of possible news

source via SMS. The information and knowledge portal is updated several times daily with fresh analysis, articles, and photos, videos, before, during and after the election. In addition to content generated by a core group of journalist, there is an important user content generation component where ordinary citizens can contribute all types of content via the interactivity system. Apart from the official portal at www.africanelections.org we have country specific portals for Ivory Coast, Guinea and that for Ghana is at www.africanelections.org/ghana with a real time twitter page at www.twitter.com/ghanaelections

The Ghana portal was the first formal experimentation of the platform for coverage of an election and it was fascinating. We had a core team of five reported lead by an editor working on the backend using the content management system to edit and or approve stories, features, blogs and results sent in from the field.

Our team was positioned at the Press Centre of the Ghana Journalist Association (GJA), which was an official Electoral Commission of Ghana (EC) accredited results collation centre. This gave us access to the official certified faxed results that goes to the EC office to be announced. Hence we crossed checked the results that are sent by our correspondent from the field via sms or email or web with that fax version from the EC before posting on our platform. We only posted certified approved results on our website while our twitter site posted provisional results. Our portal became the leading website for certified results and was quoted by the Associated Press, All Africa, BBC and a lot of leading mainstream media institutions whiles our twitter site was referred largely by the blogging and citizen media community like Global Voices etc.