

The Social Media and Nigeria's Electoral Politics since 1999: Trends and Implications for Nigeria's External Image

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Abstract

The history of electoral politics in Nigeria has played a significant role in driving the dynamic trend of the country's image in the international system. As the last millennium steadily folded off, Nigeria joined other world democracies by embracing democratic governance. The enthronement of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 redefined the country's political system with its inter-related institutions. Subsequently, periodic elections were conducted to fulfil part of the requirements of a democratic system of government. Regrettably, these elections became an albatross on Nigeria's neck with far-reaching implications for the country's image in international circles. The 2015 - general elections presented a radical departure from the previous flawed electoral processes. This paper argues that the phenomenon of the social media, has been very fundamental to the recent positive developments in Nigeria's electoral process. It asserts that following the improvement in the quality of Nigeria's electoral process as witnessed during the 2015 polls, the country's image has become significantly redeemed in international circles, it suggests the sustained patronage of the social media and its increased deployment in the monitoring and repositioning of Nigeria's electoral processes in the future.

Introduction

The twilight of the 20th century was marked by spiral dynamism in technological ingenuity, especially in the domains of information and communication networking. At the turn of the 21st century, tremendous innovations and seemingly unprecedented creative ingenuity propelled an astonishing level of expansion in the trends and utility value of information and communication technology (ICT). Today, the trends and dimensions that information and communication technology have consistently manifested are

monumental/ multidimensional and cross-cutting. This reality has both the positive and negative outcomes on human activities across the globe. Business, academic, religious, cultural, tourist, entertainment and many other human activities are affected by the manipulation and deployment of information and communication technology. In the recent years, democratic practices in Africa and elsewhere have come under the sway of the workings of these technological innovations which seem to be continuing at an ever accelerating rate.¹

The social media² is a relatively new component in the world of information and communication technology, especially in Africa. It has indisputably given a grandiose impetus to the gamut of information dissemination and participatory communication across a broad spectrum of human societies. Similarly, it has engendered a quantum degree of broad-based awareness and participation among users to the extent that peoples around the globe are instantaneously connected and engaged in the exchange of information, ideas and opinions relating to any development at both the local and international levels.

While it is undoubted that almost all forms of human activity have come under the sway of various forms of the mass media, the extent to which political activities in contemporary global system are affected by the social media - either negatively or positively - provides the compelling basis for a viable intellectual exploration. This presupposition rationalizes the relevance for exploring the extent to which the social media has affected electoral politics in Nigeria over the years. Beyond that, there is the need to link the implications of the relationship between social media and Nigeria's electoral politics for the country's external image. The essence is to expand the parameters for the analysis of a relatively new dimension to an important aspect of Nigeria's diplomatic history. The progress of this work, therefore, proceeds along the paths of this compelling intellectual exploration.

The timeframe for this disquisition is deliberately restricted to the period between 1999 and 2015 for two basic reasons. First, electoral politics re-emerged in Nigeria in 1999 after a long stretch of successive military despotisms in the country. Second, the social media is a relatively new technological innovation that has only been recently embraced among a significant population of Nigerians with a highpoint in its manifest influence on political activities before, during and after the 2015 general elections in the country.

The Social Media: Some Conceptual and Theoretical Explorations

A proper appreciation of the conceptual underpinning of what the term social media entails is tied to an adequate understanding of what media is. Generally speaking, the concept of media connotes all the means and institutions that anchor the publishing and broadcasting of information. Thus, any means through which information is published and broadcast for the consumption of the masses or the public is a media outfit. It is from this background knowledge that the logical meaning of the social media can be advanced.

Due to its characteristic fluidity in terms of shape and functionality, the concept of social media readily defies a rigidly prescribed definition.³ As a process, social media indicates a shift away from the conventional media⁴ to a new form of media through which people discover, read and share news and information content - which explains the fact that it is a fusion of sociology and technology that transforms information flow from monologue to dialogue.³ In his own contribution, Rob emphasizes the interactive nature of the social media and describes it as a consumer-generated media, new media and citizen media.⁶ From this standpoint, social media is deciphered in the light of a tripartite phenomenon that embodies the three important characteristics, which are reflective of a departure from the conventional media. The embodiment of

the three dimensions here illustrates the comprehensiveness and self-contained element of the social media.

Evans Dave adds a technical dimension to the conceptualization of the social media when he succinctly suggests that it is the democratization of information that has transformed people from content readers into content publishers.⁷ Clearly, the emphasis here is on the complex web of information generation, reading, and sharing among a broad-based participatory population. Thus, the social media is not strictly about the reading and dissemination of information among people. It also involves the creation and sharing of the information contents through channels that encourage unmitigated participation among human societies at a broad-based scale. This explains why O'Reilly is convinced that the phenomenon of social media marks a shift from a broadcast mechanism to a many-to-many model, rooted in a conversational format between authors and media consumers.⁸

From the string of submissions on the concept of the social media, it is declucible that it is a new trend that has emerged under the auspices of advanced technology in information gathering and sharing in a complex web of communication flow. The social media can, therefore, be described as a technologically inspired model of a combination of interactive platforms that enable information gathering and sharing as well as participatory communication across human societies beyond geographical limitations. Its character of multidirectional information flow in the form of active participatory communication among members of the online groups distinguishes it from the conventional media that thrives on unidirectional information flows. The social media is in all respects an inescapable revolution and a timely intervention in the mass media industry.

Most of the known theories of social media are drawn from the discipline of mass communication. This reality connects to the fact that social media itself is an aspect of mass communication. The *agenda-setting theory* and the *social cognitive theory* are considered

relevant to this discussion. There are several other relevant theories in this connection; but to save the theoretical component of the discussion from sliding into a superfluous dimension, the above two are considered most relevant and applicable in enhancing the contextual analysis of the issues at stake.

The theoretical debates of agenda-setting are driven by the assumption that the mass media predetermine what issues are regarded as important at any given point in time in a given society.⁹ The theory of agenda-setting refers to the capacity and capability of the mass media in raising the importance of an issue in the minds of the general public and policy-makers; and sometimes this is achieved through the process of gate-keeping.¹⁰ McQuail links the agenda-setting theory to electoral politics in demonstrating how the mass media can influence the perception of the public in relation to the main issues at stake in a given [political] situation.¹¹ Thus, the theoretical properties of agenda-setting are located in the influence of the mass media on the value perception, attitudes and reactions of the publics. While this is true, it is plausible to argue that agenda-setting does not strictly arrogate the power to determine actual outcomes to the influence of the mass media. For instance, the mass media has the power to influence the thinking and actions of the publics in an election situation; but cannot strictly determine the outcomes of an election.

The social cognitive theory is arguably one of the most frequently cited theories in mass communication scholarship.¹² The theory offers an explanation for the observational learning and explicit capability of human attitudes. It provides a framework for the analysis of the determinants and psychological mechanisms through which symbolic communication influences human behaviour, thought and action. For instance, the effects of the social media on the attitudes and behavioural patterns of people constitute the core relevant areas in which the social cognitive theory has been applied. This explains its relevance to the observational understanding of political behaviour and its

corresponding consequences for electoral politics in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Bandura believes that the social cognitive theory provides a causal model for explaining human behaviours under the reciprocal interactions among personal behavioural and environmental factors.¹³ Understood from this context, the mechanics of the theory proceed on a broad spectrum of inter-related elements that are deeply couched in the convergence between human behavioural and environmental dynamics. Fundamentally, therefore, the human behavioural dynamics originate from the environmental dynamics - which implies that human perceptions, attitudes, beliefs and reactions are conditioned by the environment and its dynamics. The new trends in information and communication technology epitomized by the social media vividly illustrate the dynamic character of the larger global environment and its concomitant implications for human behavioural patterns across the global system.

A point of convergence between the agenda-setting theory and the social cognitive theory is that they both provide the apertures for understanding the power of the media in relation to its influence on human behavioural patterns. The analysis of this power of influence within the contexts of the social media and electoral politics in Nigeria and elsewhere opens the vistas for an adequate understanding of the socio-political character of Nigeria's electoral politics and the realities of her external image.

The Media and Electoral Politics in Nigeria: Background Issues

The history of Nigeria's electoral politics can be traced to 1922, when the Clifford's Constitution was promulgated with its content of the electoral principle.¹⁴ The development itself laid the foundations for electoral politics in colonial Nigeria upon which later political developments galvanized in post-colonial Nigeria. From 1959, electoral politics in the country began to assume new

levels of noticeable intensification.¹⁵ The 1959 federal elections that were conducted by the departing colonialists obviously served the purpose for the institutionalization of elections and the relevant structures that would drive the political economy of the emerging post-colonial state. With the eventual attainment of political independence in 1960, Nigeria's sovereign status came along with the responsibilities of managing her political system with the relevant institutions and structures of governance.

In 1964, the first general elections were conducted under the supervision of the Nigerian authorities. The elections themselves constituted a litmus test for electioneering in the era of self-government that had emerged largely as a result of concerted agitations and articulated nationalist struggles for political independence. Paradoxically, the aftermath of the 1964 federal elections manifested high profile political tension that exacerbated the intensification of electoral violence of various dimensions. The resultant effects of the cumulative physical, structural, psychological and collateral damages experienced during the 1964 post-election violence pointed to the flawed nature of the electoral system and the uncompromising disposition of the political class in the country during the period. Similarly, the rowdy political atmosphere that sprouted from the 1964 elections exposed the incapacity of the first generation of indigenous political elites to manage the political affairs of the new independent state. The unintended consequence of this unwholesome reality was the systematic degeneracy of the country's political architecture that eventually led to the collapse of the First Republic in 1966.¹⁶ Since then, subsequent elections in the country became enmeshed in various forms of infamies with serious implications for external relations.

Electoral Politics and Nigeria's External Image

Although the 1979 federal elections marked a very important episode in the history of electoral politics in contemporary Nigeria,

they did Not as much stir international attention as theones that came after. A numberof reasons would serve to explain this historical fact. First, the wave of democratization hadnot assumed a global stature by the 1970s. thus, the concern of the wstern democracies to impose their democratic political system on non-western societies in the world system had not attained its current fierce and penetrating characteristics during the period before the eve of the 21st Century. Second, the western powers were more preoccupied with facing the reality of the Cold War with its concomitant multifarious challenges that arose from an aggressively disharmonized and ideologically polarized global political economy during the period. Third, the period between 1983 and beyond had witnessed an elongated punctuation of democratic politics in Nigeria to the extent that elections were no longer a visible feature of the country's body pllitic remained so until in 1992 when the military junta of Ibrahim Babangida commenced a political transition programme to civil rule with its highpoint in the 1993 presidential election.

At the turn of the 1990s, the end of the Cold War and the demise of bipolarity gave way to the emergence of a unipolar world order with a reinvigorated western hegemonic offensive. This provided the fecundity for a more elaborate globalization of western values in political, economic and socio-cultural dimensions. The intensification of the campaign for the domestication of western democratic system and its institutional framework in developing countries such as Nigeria began to assume a noticeable crescendo. It was largely on this premise that the 1993 presidential election in Nigeria was conducted under the syndicated watch of foreign observers.

The conduct of the 1993 presidential election and the controversies that trailed its annulment has remained historically relevant in explaining the internationalization of Nigeria's political contradictions and its implications for the country's external image in the light of electoral policics. Consequently, as Nigeria prepared

to move toward democratic system of government on the eve of the new millennium, there was a concerted external interest in the country's political development. The western powers curiously demonstrated some noticeable measure of concern about the quality of the electoral process that was to ushering a new democratic order in the country in 1999. The fact that elections were successfully conducted and a transition from a long stretch of military rule to democratic governance took place in Nigeria in 1999 was sufficient to give the country's image a positive boost in the international system. This presumption was to assume a more practical dimension when the country's president at the time, Olusegun Obasanjo, embarked on a series of foreign trips in the context of shuttle diplomacy to launder the country's battered image and to court some key foreign economic interests in pursuit of potentially rewarding international economic relations.

The 2003 general elections in Nigeria served as an acid test for a credible electoral process in the light of the country's external image in the new democratic dispensation. Incidentally, the conduct of the 2003 general elections presented a litany of electoral infelicities that debased the political maturity of the country in the eyes of both domestic and external observers. For instance, on the domestic front, K. Ajayi lamented the collision of national security forces with politicians and political thugs to perpetuate the manipulation of the electoral process and other electoral malpractices during the 2003 elections.¹⁷ On the external front, the verdict was not exactly complimentary. While the European Union was very harsh in its criticism of the 2003 electoral process and barely refrained from calling for its outright cancellation, the Commonwealth observer team was said to be indulgent and sounded more tolerable in its verdict of the elections, notwithstanding the anomalies that characterized the process.¹⁸ But from a common sense appreciation, it was discernible that there were obvious misgivings concerning the quality and outcomes of the 2003 general elections, which had negative implications for

Nigeria's image in the international system. Some of these negative implications were manifest in the global scale lack of confidence in Nigeria's electoral process and the unrewarding nature of economic diplomatic relations with the advanced capitalist economies and other major players in the global economic system during the period under review.

The general elections of 2007 in Nigeria clearly demonstrated a systematic downward trajectory in the quality of the country's electoral process in various dimensions. To illustrate this notion, the major beneficiary of the 2007 electoral process, the late President Umaru Musa Yar'Adua, sounded very trenchantly that the election which brought him to power was characterized with electoral irregularities. Similarly, some international observers were consensual in their verdict that the April 2007 elections that brought the late Yar'Adua to power fell short of basic minimum standards.¹⁹

While the quality of the 2007 electoral process in Nigeria did not present any cheering improvement on the country's image in the international system, the 2011 general elections did not significantly prove to be any different. The usual characteristics of flawed electoral processes such as monumental electoral malfeasances and other irregularities in the mould of brazen intimidation, ballot snatching, misconduct by INEC officials and politicians, orchestrated violence, and organizational and logistical problems on the election day, among other things, featured during the 2011 general elections.²⁰ However, in terms of international verdict, the quality of the 2011 electoral process was a relative departure from the berated 2007 experience. The certification of the outcomes of the 2011 elections by both the local and international observers and the commendation received by INEC for improving on the country's electoral process²¹ all vividly illustrated a relative improvement on the quality of the country's electoral process.

The 2015 electoral process in the country presented a radical departure from the previous experiences in terms of quality and at the level of local and international acceptability. Several factors have been advanced to explain this cheering development in the history of the country's political development. Major reforms by INEC that were driven by the introduction of permanent voter cards, card reader devices and a well coordinated voter education have been adequately considered as the driving elements that facilitated the quantum leap in the direction of quality electoral process in Nigeria during the 2015 general elections. These factors are well situated in explaining the improvement in the quality of Nigeria's electoral process, especially with regard to the 2015 polls. However, it is proper to give the social media a prime place in the analysis of the improved quality of electoral process in contemporary Nigeria. The contention here is that the revolution in Nigeria's electoral process as experienced during the 2015 general elections is fundamentally a function of the social media.

The Social Media, 2015 General Elections and Nigeria's External Image

The fact has been variously reiterated that Nigeria's 2015 general elections marked a glorious moment in the history of the country's political development; but the fact also needs to be emphasized that this revolution is closely tied to the influence of the social media on Nigerian politics and the behavioural dynamics of the electorates. Arguing in this frame of thought, A. L. Oseni insists that a tremendous change in Nigeria's political process has been made possible by the rise in social media; and that the extent to which the social media has influenced politics in Nigeria is prominently noted by the inability of the political parties to change election results.²²

Agreeably, the emergence of social media platforms has provided the mechanisms for prosecuting and monitoring electioneering processes, including campaigns, voting and election

results. One of the most critical areas that the social media has provided a timely intervention is in the aspect of checking the menace of election results manipulation. Through the mechanics of the social media, the 2015 election results in the designated voting centres across the country were closely monitored and intermittently broadcast on various platforms even before the official announcement by INEC. Curiously, the official results of the elections as eventually announced by INEC was not tangibly different from the results that the social media platforms had already placed in the public domain. Similarly, the job of the local and international observers were made easier as monitoring and observation of the electoral process were greatly facilitated by the spontaneous information flow that was consistently powered by the various platforms of the social media. Apart from simplifying the job of election observers, the social media also served as a facility for constantly activating the interest of the electorates in closely following the trend of events regarding the electoral process.

Admittedly, the level of apathy among Nigerians in the previous elections was drastically reduced during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. This was another landmark achievement of the social media. While the credit for concerted voter education and its positive effects goes to INEC and the conventional media during the period, the critical commendation goes to the social media for engendering the consciousness of the masses toward political participation during the 2015 electioneering processes. Beyond the consciousness toward political participation, the electorates were sensitized on the critical political issues that bothered on bringing about positive change in the overall interest of the country beyond primordial and parochial considerations. It was this realistic consciousness that triggered the needed impetus that in turn fuelled the spirit of patriotism and nationalism among Nigerians toward a credible electoral process in 2015.

The Nigerian masses were active participants in the various debates concerning the Nigerian project through the social media. Through these social media platforms, ideas and viewpoints were freely exchanged and the clash between objectivity and subjectivity in the analysis of the national question was driven by the wheels of superior reasoning. This paved the way for the Nigerian electorates to make informed electoral choices beyond mundane promptings during the 2015 general polls. Moreover, the quality of information that was placed at the disposal of the electorates partly guided them towards proper election conduct and the consciousness to police their votes against manipulative forces. All of these factors combined to effectuate the possibility of credible polls in Nigeria during the 2015 general elections.

It is important to stress that the consensual verdict of international observer missions on Nigeria's 2015 general elections meant so much for the country's image in the international circles. For instance, following the release of the Presidential and National Assembly polls, Ban Ki-Moon, the UN Secretary-General, issued an official statement to congratulate Nigerians on the conduct of the elections, which he described as peaceful and orderly.²³ Similarly, the African Union Election Observers were clear in their verdict that the 2015 general elections were conducted in a peaceful atmosphere; and that the conduct of the elections conformed to continental and regional principles of democratic elections.²⁴ In the same vein, the ECOWAS Election Observer Mission's verdict was that the 2015 general elections were free and fair despite pockets of violent incidents and logistical challenges.²⁵ The Commonwealth Election Observer Mission described the 2015 general elections as generally peaceful and transparent.²⁶

This litany of gratifying remarks from high profile international actors regarding the conduct of the 2015 general elections in Nigeria was, to say the least, image-boosting. Whereas the international media played an important conventional role by transmitting the consensus verdict of the international community

on the conduct of the 2015 polls, the social media deployed its most penetrating and broad participatory platforms in the exchanges of the positive verdict and divergent opinions on the outcomes of the elections. The end result of these concerted efforts is glimpsed from the new positive image that Nigeria now carries in the international system partly as a result of credible polls. Muhammadu Buhari, who emerged as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria from the 2015 general polls has embarked on an active engagement with the international community, including the United States of America and other notable world powers, on the platform of a reinvigorated foreign policy that is driven on Nigeria's renewed integrity and international respectability.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Nigeria has suffered a flawed electoral process in the past in different forms and dimensions. Of particular note was that the Nigerian state had suffered a severely battered and almost irredeemably damaged image in the international arena as a consequence of a distillation of factors. Nigeria's history of flawed electoral process had placed her image on the negative side of the international domain "with the attendant implications for the country's foreign policy and international economic relations. While this unsavoury reality lasted, the country suffered horrendous losses in international politics that arose from a terribly dwindled international integrity. Feeble attempts were made to correct the flawed electoral process which, by 2007, had degenerated to a very ridiculous extent. The story began to change for the better during the 2011 general elections. The 2015 general elections saw a radical departure from the grandiose electoral malfeasances of the past following which the country's image has become redeemed and strategically repositioned in the international system for beneficial outcomes. The social media was very instrumental to the attainment of this noble feat.

This discussion concludes that it was the improvement in the quality of Nigeria's electoral process as witnessed during the 2015 polls that has significantly redeemed the country's image in the international system. Realizing that the social media was instrumental to the successes recorded at the 2015 polls, it is suggested that the sustained patronage of the social media and its increased deployment in the monitoring of Nigeria's electoral processes should be intensified in the country's subsequent elections.

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Endnotes

- 1 The ground-breaking advances in information and communication technology and their application have significantly affected the modes and trends in democratic practices across the globe. The noticeable entrenchment of sustainable democratic structures for good governance in Nigeria and in some other African countries in recent times is attributable to this development. For more on this argument,

see M. F. Plattner, "Media and Democracy: The Long View," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 23, No. 4, October, 2012.

- 2 Simplistically, social media connotes and includes websites, their applications and networking that facilitate users to create, share and participate in information content dissemination across a broad spectrum of human societies. It is a relatively new component of the multifaceted information and communication technology that characterizes the 21st century global communications system.
- 3 For this submission, read Tesfaye Nekatibeb, "Evaluating the Impact of Social Media on Traditional Marketing," a Bachelor's Thesis, Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, 2012.
- 4 In the conventional media systems, information - messages, letters, broadcast, etc. - are generated and targeted at specific audiences. The flow of such information is usually in one direction and there is relative restriction in the context of participatory communication at a broad-based scale.
- 5 B. Soils, "The Definition of Social Media," <http://www.webpronews.com/blogtalk/2007/06/29/the-definition-of-social-media> [Assessed July 5, 2015].
- 6 As cited in Tesfaye Nekatibeb, "Evaluating the Impact of Social Media on Traditional Marketing," a Bachelor's Thesis, Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, 2012.
- 7 Evans Dave, *Social Media Marketing an Hour a Day*, e-book, John Willy & Sons, 2008.
- 8 T. O' Reilly, "What is web 2.0?" [Online, 2005], <http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-wcb-20.html> [Assessed July 5, 2015].
- 9 This argument explains the power of the mass media in influencing the value judgement of the masses and how societal norms, preferences and attitudes are defined by information flow from the mass media. For an elaborate discussion on the theory of agenda-setting, read 13. Folarin, *Theories of Mass*

Communication: An Introductory Text, Ibadan, Bankifol Publications, 2005, p. 95.

101. Severin and J. W. Tankard, *Mass Communication Theories, Origins, Methods and Uses in the Mass Media*, Wesley, Longman Inc., 2001, p. 219.
- 11 D. McQuail, *Muss Communication Theory*, 5th lid., London, Sage Publications, 1983, p. 512.
- 12 Byrant and Miron, 2004 (as cited in Tesfaye Nekatibeb, "Evaluating the Impact of Social Media on Traditional Marketing," a Bachelor's Thesis, Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, 2012).
- 13 A. Bandura, 2001 (Tefsaye Nekatibeb, "Evaluating the Impact of Social Media on Traditional Marketing," a Bachelor's Thesis, Helsinki Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, 2012).
- 14 The promulgation of the Clifford's Constitution of 1922 heralded the advent of electoral politics in Nigeria, following which elections were conducted, for the first time in colonial Nigeria, in Lagos and Calabar to elect members of a Legislative Council to make laws for the governance of the Southern Protectorates. For some comprehensive discussions on this development, read G. O. Olusanya, "Constitutional Development in Nigeria: 1861-1960," in O. ikime, ed., *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, Ibadan, 1 leinemann Educational Books (Nig) Ltd., 1980; and C. S. Orngu, *Socio-Political Conflicts and Nigeria's External Relations, 1953-2005*, Lagos, Bahiti and Dalila, 2014.
- 15 It was in 1959 that the colonial authorities conducted the first federal elections in the country with the intent to elect indigenous leaders who would take assume the leadership of the country at independence in 1960.
- 16 The point is that the escalated level of political instability in the country, especially the level of post-election violence that trailed the Western regional elections of 1964 and the spill-over effects of the violence to other parts of the country in the

following years provided a convenient excuse for the military to truncate the life of the First Republic. Several developments in the country over the years have since rendered this claim impotent as the messianic or interventionist role of the military in 1966 only amounted to the beginning of the militarization of Nigerian politics.

- 17 Kunle Ajayi graphically provides details of the 2003 general election rigging as perpetrated through the collision between security forces and politicians. For these details, see K. Ajayi, "Security Forces, Electoral Conduct and 2003 General Elections in Nigeria," *Journal of Social Sciences*, 13 (1), 2006, pp. 57-66. Also see C. S. Orngu, *Political Patronage and the Challenge of Development in Contemporary Nigeria*, Makurdi, Bookmakers, 2008, pp. 17-18.
- 18 Babajide Komolafe, "2003 General Elections: Observer Missions Full Verdict," *Vanguard*, May 25, 2003.
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