

SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SAFEGUARDING FREEDOM OF SPEECH: A STUDY OF TWITTER BAN IN NIGERIA

By

ANTHONY OLATOMIWA, ANIMASHAHUN ABDUL RASHEED, BELLO KAREEM
KAYODE

FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES, LAGOS STATE
UNIVERSITY, OJO

ABSTRACT

This study examined the intersection of social media regulation and the protection of freedom of speech, focusing on the case study of the Twitter ban (now X) in Nigeria. The ban, initiated by the Nigerian government in June 2021 after a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari was deleted by the platform, sparked widespread controversy and criticism from civil society organizations, international bodies, and free speech advocates. The study delves into the impacts of the ban on journalists and media professionals, highlighting their challenges in accessing information and engaging with audiences. Furthermore, the study explores the implications of the ban on freedom of expression, press freedom, and public interest in Nigeria. Reflecting on the challenges and opportunities posed by social media regulation, the study underscores the importance of balancing state interests with fundamental rights and democratic values. Recommendations are made for policymakers to consider the implications of restricting social media platforms on freedom of expression and information, foster transparency in regulatory frameworks, and promote digital literacy among stakeholders. This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on social media regulation in democracies and emphasizes the need for a rights-based approach to protect democratic values in the digital age.

Keywords: *press freedom, freedom of speech, politics and media, social media, social media regulation, Twitter ban*

Word Count: 196

INTRODUCTION

The intertwining of social media and freedom of speech is a complex and evolving issue, which has become increasingly prominent in global discourse as nations grapple with the challenges and opportunities presented by digital communication platforms. Twitter, one of the foremost social media networks, has been at the heart of this conversation due to its role in enabling real-time communication, mobilizing social movements, and, controversially, influencing political discourse (Adebayo & Busari, 2021). The ban of Twitter (now X) in Nigeria provides a critical case study for examining the tensions between government regulation of social media and preserving freedom of speech.

The Nigerian government's decision to suspend Twitter operations in the country in June 2021 came after a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari was deleted by the platform for violating its policy against abusive behaviour (Alabi, 2021).

The government cited the "persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence" as the rationale for the ban (Nwogu, 2021). This move was met with widespread criticism from civil society organizations, international bodies, and free speech advocates who argued that the ban was a violation of citizens' rights to freedom of expression and access to information as guaranteed by the Nigerian Constitution and international human rights law (United Nations, 2021).

Analytically, the Twitter ban in Nigeria raised critical questions about the balance between a state's sovereign right to regulate telecommunications within its borders and the universal human rights principles that many states, including Nigeria, have pledged to uphold (Chikem & Oliobi, 2023). The ban highlights the power struggle between national governments,

around the world, and global social media companies in the governance of online spaces (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Twitter, in its role as a platform for public discourse, wields significant influence over the flow of information and has its own set of policies and norms that may not always align with the laws or expectations of individual countries (MacKinnon, 2012).

From a critical perspective, the ban can be seen as a form of digital authoritarianism, where the government uses its control over internet infrastructure to restrict access to information and suppress dissent (Freedom House, 2020). This form of control is particularly concerning in the context of a democratic society where freedom of speech is essential for the functioning of the political system and the protection of individual rights. The Nigerian government's action against Twitter also set a precedent that could embolden other regimes to similarly restrict social media platforms under the guise of national security or public order, thereby undermining global internet freedom.

In the wake of the Twitter suspension, there was also a surge in the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) by Nigerians seeking to bypass the ban, reaffirming the determination of citizens to maintain their digital rights and access to information (Adebayo & Busari, 2021). This workaround, however, is not a sustainable solution to the larger issue of state censorship and does not address the legal and ethical implications of the government's actions. The use of VPNs also raises questions about digital literacy and equitable access to information as those with the knowledge and resources to circumvent the ban could continue to access Twitter, while others without such means were effectively silenced, further entrenching the

digital divide (Ekwueme, Onyebadi & Ikechukwu, 2022). Moreover, according to George and Kabir (2022), the use of VPNs can introduce new risks to users, including exposure to cybersecurity threats and potential legal consequences, as the act of circumventing a government ban could be deemed illegal.

However, the resolution of the Twitter ban in Nigeria came through negotiations between the Nigerian government and Twitter, resulting in the lifting of the suspension in January 2022, after Twitter agreed to meet certain conditions set by the government (BBC News, 2022). This outcome demonstrates the potential for dialogue and engagement between states and social media companies, yet it also raises concerns about the possible concessions that platforms may make to operate within certain jurisdictions, potentially compromising their policies on freedom of expression and user privacy.

In conclusion, the Twitter ban in Nigeria serves as a critical case study for examining the complex and multifaceted relationship between social media regulation and the safeguarding of freedom of speech. It illustrates the power dynamics between national governments and global digital platforms, the economic and social repercussions of social media restrictions, the resilience of citizens in claiming their digital rights, and the importance of legal and international frameworks in protecting those rights. The case of Nigeria provides valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and civil society actors to understand the challenges of regulating social media in a way that respects human rights, encourages economic growth, and maintains public order. The implications of such regulatory actions extend beyond national borders, influencing global norms and practices related to internet governance and digital rights.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The pervasive integration of social media into daily life has raised significant concerns regarding the balance between regulation and the right to freedom of speech. In June 2021, the Nigerian government indefinitely suspended Twitter's operations within the country, citing the use of the platform for activities that could undermine Nigeria's corporate existence (BBC News, 2021).

This move was met with widespread criticism from civil society organizations, international bodies, and human rights advocates, who argued that the ban was a disproportionate response to Twitter's deletion of a controversial tweet by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, which was said to violate the platform's rules against abusive behaviour (Maclean & Uweh, 2021).

Studies indicate that the control or suppression of social media platforms can have far-reaching effects on democratic participation, freedom of information, and civic engagement (Adegoke, 2021; York, 2020). Furthermore, the ban's potential to infringe on individual rights and its implications for digital rights governance raises the question of how to effectively safeguard freedom of speech in the digital era (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The challenge lies in establishing a regulatory framework that protects against misuse of social media while upholding the right to free expression as enshrined in international human rights law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966).

The Nigerian Twitter ban is emblematic of a broader global trend where governments are increasingly resorting to internet shutdowns and social media restrictions in the name of national security or public order (Access Now, 2021). These actions often lack transparency and accountability, leading to concerns about their legality and the potential for abuse. The Twitter ban in Nigeria, for instance, was criticized for lacking a clear legal basis, as the Nigerian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of

expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and receive and impart ideas and information without interference (Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999).

From a legal and ethical perspective, the regulation of social media must be reconciled with international human rights standards. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations, 1966), to which Nigeria is a party, both affirm the right to freedom of expression. These instruments stipulate that any restrictions on this right must be provided by law and be necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others, or the protection of national security, public order, or public health or morals.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the tensions between social media regulation and freedom of speech through the lens of the Twitter ban in Nigeria. By examining the justifications provided by the Nigerian government, the responses from global and local actors, and the subsequent outcomes of this regulatory action, the research aims to contribute to the discourse on how states might navigate the protection of national interests and security concerns without encroaching on fundamental civil liberties.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- To investigate the response of journalists and media professionals to the ban and its impact on their work.
- To examine the effectiveness of social media regulation in Nigeria in protecting public interest while respecting freedom of speech.
- To identify the challenges and opportunities that arise from regulating social media platforms like Twitter (now X) in the context of a democratic society.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How did the Twitter (now X) ban affect journalists in Nigeria regarding their ability to gather information, report news, and engage with their audiences?
- What are journalists' perspectives on the necessity and effectiveness of social media regulation in Nigeria?
- How do journalists believe that social media regulation should be structured to protect freedom of speech while preventing harmful online behaviour?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In examining the complex and multifaceted issue of social media regulation concerning safeguarding freedom of speech in Nigeria, it is imperative to delve into the broad spectrum of literature that encompasses legal frameworks,

human rights, governance, and the socio-political implications of regulation. The Nigerian context presents a particularly interesting case study due to its history of political instability, issues of ethnic violence, and the recent surge in social media

usage. The government's efforts to regulate social media are often seen as attempts to quell dissent and control the narrative on matters of public interest (Adepetun, 2021). However, the government has also cited concerns about the spread of misinformation and hate speech as major impetuses for regulation (Omenugha & Uzuegbunam, 2020).

Furthermore, literature on the subject of social media regulation often highlights the role of social media in enhancing democratic engagement, enabling citizens to participate in political discourse, and holding their governments accountable (Olorunnisola & Douai, 2013). In Nigeria, platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been instrumental in movements such as #EndSARS, which protested police brutality and corruption (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2021). The government's suspension of Twitter in June 2021, following the removal of a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari for violating its rules, was met with international condemnation and raised concerns about the state of democracy and human rights in Nigeria (Uzodike & Onapajo, 2022).

Comparative studies between Nigeria and other countries with different approaches to social media regulation provide valuable insights. For example, Ghana is often cited as a model for its relative restraint in regulating social media, thereby fostering a more open and democratic space for public discourse (Ani & Ifeoma, 2020). On the other hand, countries like China have implemented stringent controls that effectively censor social media content, which has led to significant restrictions on freedom of speech (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013).

Critical analyses of social media regulation often invoke the international human rights framework, particularly the provisions of Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which guarantees the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right is also enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Nigeria is a party (United Nations, 1976). The challenge for Nigeria,

as for many other nations, is to reconcile its international commitments with domestic policy actions. Scholars like Onuoha (2021) argue that Nigeria's social media regulation efforts must be carefully scrutinized to ensure they do not infringe upon these international human rights standards. The application of international human rights law to the digital realm is an emerging field of inquiry. For instance, Kaye (2019) has discussed the role of social media in the public sphere and the responsibilities of states to protect freedom of expression while also ensuring the digital space is not used for harmful purposes. The literature suggests that any regulatory measures must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate to the aim pursued, aligning with the principles laid out by the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC, 2011).

Studies also examined the role of social media companies in regulation and the tension between their policies and national sovereignty. While companies like Twitter and Facebook have their community standards and mechanisms for content moderation, their decisions can sometimes conflict with a nation's regulatory efforts or cultural norms (Klonick, 2018). The Nigerian government's interactions with these companies, particularly during the Twitter suspension, highlight the complexities of global digital governance and the power struggles between states and multinational corporations (Fischer, 2021).

In sum, studies on social media regulation in Nigeria present a complex and nuanced picture of the challenges and considerations involved in protecting freedom of speech in the digital age. It emphasizes the importance of a careful balance between regulation and rights, the need for stakeholder engagement, and the imperative to align with international human rights standards. As Nigeria continues to navigate this terrain, the lessons drawn from both national experiences and comparative analyses will be invaluable in shaping policies that respect the fundamental rights of citizens while addressing the legitimate concerns posed by the digital landscape.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The chilling effect theory and libertarian theory are two critical frameworks in the realm of free speech and media regulation that have long been subjects of scholarly debate and practical consideration. The chilling effect refers to the phenomenon whereby lawful expression is discouraged by the threat or fear of legal sanctions (Garnett, 2010). This theory is particularly relevant in understanding the self-censorship that individuals or organizations may practice to avoid potential legal trouble or other negative repercussions (Baulking, 2004). In contrast, libertarian theory, with its roots in the Enlightenment and classical liberal thought, advocates for the free and open exchange of ideas, considering it crucial for the discovery of truth and the advancement of society (Blasi, 1977).

These two theories can be applied to this study given the June 2021 issue when the Nigerian government indefinitely suspended Twitter, citing the persistent use of the platform for activities capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence (BBC News, 2021). The ban was met with significant backlash, as it raised concerns about the state of free expression and press freedom in the country. From the perspective of the chilling effect theory, the Nigerian government's decision to suspend Twitter could be seen as a government action that potentially discourages the free flow of information and ideas. The ban may have created a climate of fear among social media users, leading to self-censorship to avoid repercussions from the government. The threat of legal sanction or punishment for using Twitter could have a powerful deterrent effect on individuals who might otherwise use the platform

to express dissenting opinions or share information that is critical of the government. This chilling effect on speech is antithetical to democratic principles and the right to free expression recognized by international human rights frameworks (UN General Assembly, 1948).

The libertarian theory would critique the Twitter ban from the standpoint of its interference with the marketplace of ideas. A fundamental tenet of libertarian thought is that government should not be the arbiter of truth or the gatekeeper of information (Mill, 1859). By restricting access to a major social media platform, the Nigerian government effectively limited the channels through which ideas and information could flow freely, thus undermining the process by which society sifts through diverse opinions to find truth. The ban could be viewed as an infringement on individual autonomy and the right to seek and impart information without government restraint. From a libertarian standpoint, the marketplace of ideas is weakened when a government takes such overt action to control the means of communication, as it prevents the robust exchange of ideas that is essential for democratic governance and individual freedom.

In conclusion, the chilling effect theory and libertarian theory provide valuable lenses through which to analyze the implications of the Twitter ban in Nigeria for free speech and social media regulation. Both theories underscore the importance of protecting freedom of expression from government encroachment, albeit with different emphases on the mechanisms and implications of such protection.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a descriptive research design, focusing on a qualitative approach. This design is chosen due to its effectiveness in exploring complex social phenomena, particularly when examining individuals' experiences, perceptions, and opinions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To select participants for this study, a purposive sampling technique was employed to select 5 participants. The participants were selected based on their

expertise in the media industry. The criteria for selection include their professional background, contributions to discussions on social media regulation, and their perspectives on freedom of speech. Data was collected through key informant interviews. This method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data.

RESULTS

Impact on Media Professionals and Journalism

Looking at the Impact of the Twitter Ban on Media Professionals, it is evident that journalists feel the same resentment towards the ban on Twitter by the Buhari administration and it impacted how they were supposed to function.

Respondent A, a Sports Broadcast Journalist stated that "Twitter was a true way to hit out... It was a very sad day for the free press in Nigeria... Twitter was still being used because the truth was that the government and the presidency did not expect the backlash they would get at the time."

This response highlights the significant impact of the Twitter ban on media professionals in Nigeria, particularly journalists who relied on the platform for timely information and news dissemination. The banning of Twitter led to a sense of loss of press freedom in the country, as journalists had to find alternative ways to access and share information. The unexpected backlash from the public and continued use of Twitter through VPNs despite the ban underscored the resilience of media professionals in adapting to the challenges posed by the restriction.

Also, Respondent B, a Veteran Journalist/Editor-in-Chief expressed that "the ban on X amounted to taking away some of our readers and a reduction, temporarily though, in the amount of traffic we enjoyed... It was a matter of going to other platforms and getting the information you may need."

Freedom of Speech and Public Interest

In the responses provided by the interviewees regarding the Twitter (now X) ban and its implications on freedom of speech and public interest in Nigeria, a common thread emerges. Respondent A, a Sports Broadcast Journalist, expressed concern over the impact of the ban on freedom of expression and press freedom in Nigeria. The respondent highlighted Twitter as a "...critical tool for real-time information dissemination and public discourse... and enabling individuals to freely express themselves and hold the government accountable." The

This response emphasizes the direct impact of the Twitter ban on media professionals, particularly in terms of audience reach and traffic to media outlets. The loss of a significant platform like Twitter resulted in a temporary setback in reaching readers and sharing stories. The necessity to transition to other social media platforms to maintain communication with the audience demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of journalists in mitigating the effects of the ban on their work.

Respondent C, a Journalist/Blogger commenting said that:

the ban significantly impacted my work, as I lost a vital channel for communication and dissemination of information... It became more challenging to reach my audience, source for news, and engage in the public discourse that shapes our national conversation.

This underscores the detrimental effect of the Twitter ban on individual media professionals, particularly bloggers and journalists who used the platform for communication and engagement. The ban disrupted the flow of information and hindered the ability to interact with the audience and participate in public discourse. The challenges faced by the respondents in reaching their audience and sourcing news highlight the critical role of social media platforms in the professional practices of media professionals in Nigeria.

respondent's narrative reflects a sentiment of loss of press freedom in Nigeria and the struggle to maintain transparency and open dialogue in the absence of a key communication platform like Twitter.

Similarly, Respondent B, a Veteran Journalist/Editor-in-Chief, underscored the ban's effects on public interest and freedom of speech. The respondent noted that "the reduction in traffic and audience engagement resulting from the ban posed the challenge of reaching readers and

sharing stories without the platform." Despite the temporary nature of the setback, the respondent's experience accentuates how restrictions on social media platforms like Twitter can limit access to information and impede the free flow of communication crucial for a vibrant public sphere.

Moreover, Respondent C, a Journalist/Blogger, echoed the sentiment of a significant impact on freedom of speech and public interest due to the Twitter ban. The respondent described losing a vital channel for communication, dissemination of information, and engagement with the audience, resulting in challenges in sourcing news and participating in national conversations. This portrayal of the ban's effect underscores the vital role that social media platforms play in facilitating public discourse, fostering dialogue, and enabling

Challenges and Opportunities

In exploring the challenges and opportunities posed by the regulation of social media platforms like Twitter (now X) in Nigeria, the responses provided by the interviewees shed light on the complexities of navigating such restrictions.

Respondent A highlighted the challenges faced by Nigerians in response to the ban. The respondent pointed out the significant backlash from the public and the continued use of VPNs to access Twitter, indicating widespread dissatisfaction and resilience in circumventing the restrictions. This response underscores the challenges posed by regulatory measures that limit access to vital communication channels while also showcasing the adaptability and determination of individuals to maintain their online presence and access to information.

Respondent B further shared insights into the challenges encountered in adapting to the Twitter ban. The respondent noted the impact on reaching readers and traffic to media outlets, highlighting the need to shift to alternative platforms to compensate for the loss. The response illustrates the immediate difficulties faced by media professionals in adjusting their practices and engaging with their audience in the absence of a prominent social media platform like Twitter. Despite the challenges, the respondent's narrative hints at an opportunity to explore alternative avenues for communication and storytelling in a changing digital landscape.

individuals to express their views freely, underlining the potential consequences of restricting such platforms on democratic engagement and freedom of speech.

In sum, the responses reflect a collective concern among media professionals in Nigeria regarding the balance between protecting public interest and upholding freedom of speech, particularly in the context of social media regulation. The narratives highlight the intricate relationship between social media platforms like Twitter, freedom of expression, and the public's right to access information and engage in democratic practices, underscoring the challenges and implications of restrictions on these platforms for media professionals and the broader society.

Furthermore, Respondent D reflected on the challenges brought about by the Twitter ban, emphasizing the loss of a vital communication channel and the increased difficulty in engaging with the audience and sourcing news. This narrative underscores the disruptive nature of regulatory measures on media professionals and their daily practices, highlighting the hurdles faced in maintaining an online presence and participating in public discourse. The response hints at the broader implications of social media regulations on freedom of speech and democratic engagement, suggesting a need to navigate these challenges while upholding fundamental rights.

In summary, the responses from the interviewees reveal a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities arising from the regulation of social media platforms like Twitter in Nigeria. The narratives capture the multifaceted nature of these challenges, from limitations in communication and audience engagement to the resilience and adaptability displayed by media professionals in response to regulatory constraints. While the challenges posed by such regulations are evident, the responses also hint at potential opportunities for innovation, alternative platforms, and community building in the face of regulatory challenges, illustrating a complex landscape where obstacles and possibilities coexist in the realm of digital communication and freedom of speech.

Government Control and Political Dynamics

One of the recurring themes in the responses of the respondents is that the ban on Twitter was nothing more than the government's need to control the media and an act of political stunt. Respondent A, expressed concern over the governmental control exerted through the ban and its implications for press freedom. The respondent highlighted the clash between the government's actions and the principles of free speech, indicating a broader political dynamic at play in the regulatory decisions surrounding social media platforms. The narrative suggests a critical analysis of the motivations behind the ban and its potential impact on democratic practices within the country.

Respondent B also underscored the power play between the government and social media platforms, alluding to the sensitive political dynamics surrounding the regulation of online spaces. The respondent's perspective suggests a critical view of the government's justifications for

the ban and raises questions about the balance between public interest and governmental control over the flow of information. This narrative reflects a deep awareness of the political nuances shaping regulatory decisions and the broader implications for media freedom and democratic engagement.

Additionally, Respondent C echoed concerns over the government's actions and highlighted the impact on freedom of speech and public interest. The respondent's narrative delves into the challenges posed by governmental control over social media platforms like Twitter and emphasizes the need to safeguard democratic principles amidst regulatory interventions. This perspective offers a nuanced understanding of the political dynamics at play, emphasizing the delicate balance between protecting public interest and respecting freedom of expression in the context of regulatory measures.

Role of Social Media in Democracy

In this theme of the Role of Social Media in Democracy, the interview responses by media professionals in Nigeria provide valuable insights into the significance of platforms like Twitter (now X) in supporting democratic practices and civic engagement. Respondent A, highlighted the pivotal role of Twitter in enhancing democracy and fostering democratic practices. The respondent emphasised how social media platforms enable individuals to express themselves freely, mobilise for causes, and hold the government accountable. The mention of past elections and movements underscored the transformative power of social media in shaping political discourse and facilitating citizen engagement in the democratic process.

Respondent D also acknowledged the importance of platforms like Twitter in providing a space for citizens to express their views, reach policymakers, and engage in robust interactions. The respondent's narrative reflected on the accessibility and connectivity offered by social media platforms, emphasizing their role in promoting dialogue, exchange of ideas, and national growth across various domains within a democratic society.

Moreover, Respondent C, given her experience as a Journalist/Blogger, echoed the sentiments regarding the significance of social media in amplifying democratic practices. The respondent highlighted the platform's role in providing a voice for ordinary Nigerians, enabling advocacy, and fostering civic participation in critical societal issues. The narrative underscored how social media platforms have become crucial tools for citizens to assert their positions, engage with policymakers, and make themselves relevant in the public sphere.

Collectively, the responses from the media professionals paint a vivid picture of the instrumental role played by social media platforms like Twitter in promoting democracy and civic engagement in Nigeria. The narratives encompass themes of empowerment, advocacy, and accountability, illustrating how these platforms have become indispensable tools for citizens, journalists, and activists to shape political narratives, facilitate public discourse, and drive social change within a democratic framework.

DISCUSSION

The results of interviews with journalists reveal that the ban imposed by the Buhari administration had a notable effect on media professionals, significantly hindering their ability to access and disseminate information promptly. This challenge to press freedom aligns with previous studies which have shown that governmental control of social media can lead to reduced opportunities for journalists to perform their roles effectively (York, 2019). The current findings highlight the essential nature of social media for the press, corroborating the view that social media have become a crucial part of the journalistic landscape (Posetti & Matthews, 2018).

The resilience and adaptability of journalists in response to the ban, as they sought alternative methods to communicate and share information, speak to the innovative spirit that constraints can sometimes engender. This echoes the work of Faris et al. (2017), who found that journalists often employ creative measures to bypass internet censorship. Their strategic use of VPNs and diversification of their social media presence not only reflect the persistence of journalists under restrictive conditions but also indicate a shift towards a more versatile approach to news dissemination in the face of adversity. This adaptability is in line with previous findings that show journalists often resort to innovative measures when faced with restrictions (York, 2014). Such creativity in the face of adversity is crucial for maintaining a semblance of press freedom and ensuring the flow of information to the public.

The use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and the diversification of social media presence are adaptive strategies that reflect the findings of previous studies where journalists and citizens circumvent censorship using technological tools (Dainow, 2016). These strategies relate to Libertarian Theory as they represent efforts to preserve a free and independent press environment, counteracting government attempts to monopolize information channels.

The perceived impact of the Twitter bans on freedom of expression, press freedom, and public interest was a significant concern among media

professionals. This resonates with the Chilling Effect theory, which posits that the fear of legal or extralegal repercussions can deter individuals from exercising their freedom of speech (Gelber & McNamara, 2015). In the Nigerian context, the ban can be seen as a form of indirect censorship, potentially leading to self-censorship among journalists who might fear repercussions for their reporting.

Furthermore, the findings suggest a tension between protecting the public interest and upholding freedom of speech in the realm of social media regulation. This echoes the Libertarian Theory of the press, which argues for minimal state intervention in the media to ensure a free and independent press that can act as a watchdog over the government (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). The Twitter ban, viewed by some as a political manoeuvre, stands in contrast to the principles of Libertarian Theory, insinuating a form of government control over media that could undermine democratic practices.

Media professionals' concerns about the challenges in reaching audiences and sharing stories due to the Twitter ban further illustrate the role of social media as a vital conduit for public engagement. Previous studies have highlighted how social media platforms expand the reach of journalists and foster interaction with the public (Hermida, 2010). The ban's disruption of this communication channel suggests a potential decline in opportunities for civic engagement and public dialogue, which are cornerstones of a healthy democracy. This finding also aligns with scholarly discussions that highlight the delicate equilibrium between protecting societal interests, such as national security or public order, and upholding fundamental rights like freedom of expression (Balkin, 2015). Striking the right balance is crucial for ensuring that regulatory measures do not unduly infringe upon individual liberties or impede the public's right to information.

However, the reliance on social media platforms for shaping political narratives and driving social change is evident in the findings, underscoring the role of platforms like Twitter in enhancing

democracy, civic engagement, and accountability. The journalists' perceptions align with the body of research that identifies social media as a democratizing force, capable of mobilizing citizens and influencing political outcomes (Tufekci, 2017). These platforms offer a space for robust interactions between the public and policymakers, facilitating a more participatory form of democracy. As such, Twitter's role extends beyond a mere communication tool to a significant medium for civic discourse and social activism (Loader & Mercea, 2012).

In conclusion, the interviews with journalists in Nigeria provide a comprehensive view of the ramifications of social media regulation on freedom of speech and journalistic practice. The findings underscore the delicate balance between

state interests and individual freedoms, reflecting broader debates within media studies. The resilience and innovation shown by Nigerian journalists in the face of the Twitter ban are commendable, yet the restrictions pose a threat to democratic values and the right to information. The study contributes to the ongoing discourse on the role of social media in democracies and the impact of governmental control on press freedom, with implications for policymakers, media professionals, and civil society at large. It highlights the necessity for a regulatory approach that safeguards the principles of freedom of speech and the public's right to information, which are essential for the functioning of a democratic society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study calls for a nuanced approach to social media regulation that upholds freedom of speech, fosters civic engagement, and safeguards press freedom in Nigeria and several recommendations can be made to safeguard freedom of speech and press freedom in the country. Firstly, policymakers should consider the implications of restricting access to social media platforms like Twitter on freedom of expression and the public's right to information. Any regulatory measures should be carefully crafted to strike a balance between protecting societal interests, such as national security, and upholding fundamental rights like freedom of speech.

Secondly, there is a need for collaborative efforts between government institutions, media

professionals, and civil society to develop transparent and inclusive regulatory frameworks for social media. Such frameworks should aim to foster dialogue, respect diverse perspectives, and ensure accountability in the regulation of online spaces.

Furthermore, promoting digital literacy and awareness among journalists, citizens, and policymakers is essential to mitigate the impact of social media bans and censorship. By understanding the implications of regulatory actions on freedom of speech and journalistic practices, stakeholders can advocate for policies that uphold democratic values and promote an open and informed society.

CONCLUSION

This study provides valuable insights into the challenges and implications of governmental control over online platforms. The findings emphasize the delicate balance between state interests and individual freedoms, shedding light on the need for regulatory measures that respect democratic principles and the public's right to information. Overall, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of social media in democracies, the impact of regulatory actions on journalistic practices, and the implications for fundamental rights and democratic values. It

underscores the importance of a rights-based approach to social media regulation that respects the principles of freedom of expression and information while promoting a vibrant and inclusive public sphere.

REFERENCES

- Adebayo, B., & Busari, S. (2021). Nigerians are bypassing the country's restrictions on Twitter. CNN. Retrieved from
- Adebayo, F., & Terlumun, T. (2021). Social media regulation in Nigeria: Issues and challenges. *African Journal of Information Systems*, 13(3), 204-222.
- Adegoke, Y. (2021). Nigeria's Twitter ban leaves some businesses in the lurch. Reuters.
- Alabi, T. (2021). The impact of the Twitter ban on freedom of expression in Nigeria. *Journal of African Law*, 65(2), 189-207.
- Adepetun, A. (2021). The social media bill and the fight against misinformation in Nigeria. *Media, Culture & Society*, 43(7), 1254-1270.
- Adeyanju, C. T., & Haruna, I. (2021). Democratic governance and the challenges of social media regulation in Nigeria: A critique of the social media bill. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 13(2), 193-210.
- Agbedo, C. U., & Ezebuenyi, E. (2021). Social media regulation, disinformation, and the crisis of trust in journalism in Nigeria. *Journalism Practice*, 15(6), 805-822.
- Akinfemisoye, M. O. (2022). Social media and the challenges of democratic communication in Nigeria. In W. Mano & V. W. Thesen (Eds.), *Social Media and Elections in Africa*, Volume 1 (pp. 45-62). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ani, K. J., & Ifeoma, M. A. (2020). Comparative analysis of social media regulation in West Africa: Lessons for Nigeria. *West Africa Insight*, 5(1), 34-46.
- Balkin, J. M. (2004). Free speech and hostile environments. *Yale Law Journal*, 99(5), 1035-1090.
- Emord, J. W. (1991). Freedom, technology, and the First Amendment. Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy.
- Garnett, N. S. (2010). Private property, public speech, and the chilling effect. *Columbia Law Review*, 110(7), 1299-1350.
- Lemley, M. A., & Volokh, E. (2017). Law, virtual reality, and augmented reality. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, 166(5), 1051-1134.
- Stone, G. R. (2004). *Perilous times: Free speech in wartime from the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism*. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Sunstein, C. R. (1999). The law of group polarization. *The University of Chicago Law Review*, 67(3), 1765-1809.
- Tufekci, Z. (2018). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.
- UN General Assembly. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*.
- BBC News. (2021). Nigeria suspends Twitter operations, says platform 'undermines its corporate existence'.
- BBC News. (2022). Nigeria lifts Twitter ban after seven months. Retrieved from
- Blasi, V. (1977). The checking value in First Amendment theory. *American Bar Foundation Research Journal*, 2(3), 521-649.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. Sage.
- Chikwem, J. O., & Oliobi, F. N. (2023). Social media regulation and challenges to democracy in Nigeria.

African Journal of Political Science and International Relations, 15(3), 45-59.

Clement, J. (2021). Number of Twitter users in Nigeria. Statista. Retrieved from

Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. (1999). Chapter IV, Section 39.

Dahir, A. L. (2021). Nigeria's Twitter ban leaves some businesses in the lurch. The New York Times. Retrieved from

Deibert, R. (2020). Reset: Reclaiming the Internet for Civil Society. House of Anansi Press.

Ekwueme, L. E., Onyebadi, U., & Ikechukwu, N. (2022). Twitter as a podium of protest: A study of the #EndSARS campaign in Nigeria. Social Media Society, 8(1), 20563051221083376.

Enonchong, L. N. (2021). Freedom of expression and the Twitter ban in Nigeria. International and Comparative Law Quarterly, 70(3), 669-680.

European External Action Service. (2021). Nigeria: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the suspension of Twitter. Retrieved from

Fischer, E. (2021). The role of private companies in public internet censorship: A comparative study of social media companies' responses to government pressure. Computer Law & Security Review, 41, 105520.

Freedom House. (2020). Freedom on the Net 2020: The pandemic's digital shadow. Retrieved from

Freedom House. (2021). Nigeria Country Report. Retrieved from

Gelber, K., & McNamara, L. (2016). The effects of civil hate speech laws: Lessons from Australia. Law & Society Review, 50(3), 631-664.

George, L. E., & Kabir, A. L. (2022). Regulating social media in Nigeria: A critical analysis of the Twitter ban. Journal of Information Policy, 12, 1-22.

Gillespie, T. (2020). Custodians of the internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media. Yale University Press.

Human Rights Watch. (2021). Nigeria: Twitter Ban Is Bad for Business. Retrieved from

Kaye, D. (2019). Speech police: The global struggle to govern the internet. Columbia Global Reports.

Klonick, K. (2018). The new governors: The people, rules, and processes governing online speech. Harvard Law Review, 131(6), 1598-1670.

Koops, B. J., & Goodwin, M. (2014). Cyberspace, the cloud, and cross-border criminal investigation: The limits and possibilities of international law. In M. Gill (Ed.), Cybercrime: Critical Issues in a Global Context (pp. 164-190). Routledge.

MacKinnon, R. (2012). Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle For Internet Freedom. Basic Books.

Maclean, R., & Uweh, C. (2021). Nigeria bans Twitter after company deletes President Buhari's tweet. The New York Times.

Muller, J. Z. (2020). Free speech history and the challenges to it today. Journal of Democracy, 31(3), 5-17.

Nwogu, C. (2021). Nigeria's Twitter ban: Government orders prosecution of violators. Premium Times Nigeria. Retrieved from

Ojebode, A. (2021). The regulation of social media in Africa: An analysis of Nigeria's social media bill. Information, Communication & Society, 24(7), 993-1009.

- 
- Olukotun, A. (2021). Media accountability and democracy in Nigeria: The imperative of a synergistic approach. In S. O. Oyedemi (Ed.), *Media, Accountability and Democracy in Africa* (pp. 19-37). Routledge.
- Olorunnisola, A. A., & Douai, A. (2013). *New media influence on social and political change in Africa*. IGI Global.
- Onapajo, H., & Uzodike, U. O. (2021). #EndSARS: The movement against police brutality in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 120(479), 326-338.
- Omenugha, K. A., & Uzuegbunam, C. E. (2020). Narratives of digital disconnection and the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria. *African Identities*, 18(4), 397-415.
- Onuoha, B. (2021). Social media regulation in Nigeria: A legal and policy analysis of the Cybercrimes Act and the proposed Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill. *Journal of Information Policy*, 11, 24-51.
- Oso, L., & Pate, U. A. (2021). The media and democratic governance in Nigeria: From the pre-colonial era to the digital age. In W. Mano & V. W. Thesen (Eds.), *Social Media and Elections in Africa*, Volume 1 (pp. 19-44). Palgrave Macmillan.
- United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.
- United Nations. (1966). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*.
- United Nations. (1976). *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*. Retrieved from
- United Nations. (2021). OHCHR | Nigeria: UN experts condemn Twitter ban, call for immediate reversal. Retrieved from
- Uzodike, U. O., & Onapajo, H. (2022). Digital activism and authoritarian adaptability in Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 121(482), 52-73.
- York, J. C. (2020). *Silicon values: The future of free speech under surveillance capitalism*. Verso Books.