

Freedom of expression and the ban on Twitter usage in Nigeria by the Federal Government of Nigeria: criticism and consensus by the public/users

By

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Abstract

Press freedom, Freedom of speech and expression is perceived to still remain an illusion in Nigeria. Section 39 of the amended 1999 Nigerian constitution says (1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression including freedom to opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. In 2020 Twitter was ban in Nigeria. The Nigerian Government on 5th June, 2021 officially put an indefinite ban on Twitter, restricting it from operating in Nigeria. The ban was condemned and applauded by many including some important personnel. The aim of this study therefore is to seek out the publics/users who expressed concern about this and interview them in order to expand our knowledge of their concerns as it infringes/affects human right to freedom of speech and expression, as such questions will, without doubt, resurface with the next ban. The research design for this study is qualitative methods. A discourse theoretical analysis of the data gathered will be employed. Individual differences are observed. We argue that the difference found can best be explained by the different perception of the action of the government by individual public/user.

Keywords: Freedom of expression, Twitter, users, Nigeria, ban, criticism/consensus, UNESCO

Introduction

Freedom of expression is the ability for one to express himself or herself without fear or prejudice. It means the ability to access information, opinions and expressions of others without interference. It is the power or right to express one's opinion without censorship, restraint or legal penalty. You have the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of your choice without interference and regardless of frontiers. This means you have the freedom to express yourself online and to access information and the opinions and expression of others.

Nigeria being a democratic nation that gained independence from Britain in 1960 has such provision in section 39 of the amended 1999 constitution which says (1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference. The UN acts, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which is acknowledged to be the core International Legal document on standards of human rights applies to all UN member states of which Nigeria is one. Article 19 of its declaration says: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, whereby this also includes freedom to hold opinion and expression, as well as to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media"

The UN Charter which was adopted in 1945 was the first International document to recognize the protection and promotion of human rights as an obligation to be carried out by individuals, as well as States collectively (Langley, 1999, as cited in Nwankwo, 2011).

Twitter whose mission in Nigeria and around the world "is to serve the public conversation" is a social networking site founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and Evan Williams. This site is meant to help friend, family, colleagues etc.. communicate and keep up with one another through status update. Users are allowed to receive and sent short messages called

Tweets. It's a micro-blogging system. Twitter also allows users to come across latest news, events, happenings as well as events people follow (Hubspot, 2020). Twitter recorded 330 million monthly active users at the first quarter of 2019 and daily tweets of over 500 million world wide (Ominicron, 2020). By the third quarter of 2019, Twitter live streamed 96 million hours of user-generated content via periscope (Ominicron, 2020).

In 2014, the number of Twitter timeline views crossed the 200 billion mark, and over 74% of users confirmed that they use the network for source of news (Pew Centre 2020). Twitter is worth \$22.55B. Particularly in Nigeria, Twitter had 4.95 million users in Nigeria in early 2023 (based on numbers published in Twitters advertising resources). This figure means that Twitter's ad reach in Nigeria was equivalent to 22 percent of the total population at the time (13/2/2023) <https://datarepotal.com> . Twitter is perceived to be one of the major sources of communication, information, source of living, campaign/advocacy. Twitter platform serves as a platform for people to express their opinions freely without fear or prejudice. Research points to a growing reliance in news reporting on tweets from political leaders, along with posts from ordinary citizens (Brands et al., 2018, Broersma and Graham, 2012) Twitter is perceived to have become increasingly popular with academics, students, Journalists, politicians, policy makers, NGO's and the general public in Nigeria.

There are other social networking sites such as Facebook, U-Tube, Instagram etc. more than any other social media platform, Twitter has rapidly risen to prominence in Journalists' political reporting toolkit (McGregor and Molyneux, 2018, Metag and Rauchfleisch, 2017; parmelee, 2014).The social media are technologically based innovations which expand information, ideas, messages, expose crime and bring about the development of communities

(Atinuke & Oluwaseyi, 2017). The social media have advanced development through there news platforms and services used to connect communities of people.

On the 5th of June 2021, the Federal Government of Nigeria officially announced an indefinite ban on Twitter, restricting it from operating in the country. The reason given for this was due to circulation of hate speech, fake news, misleading information, several wicked/cyber crime, online violence and harassment, fraud etc. The Federal Government of Nigeria felt that this actions were threats to democracy and peaceful co-existence of the citizens. However, this ban came two days after it deleted Tweets made by the President, Muhammadu Buhari on the President's official handle @MBuhari warning the South Eastern people of a potential repeat of the 1967 Biafran war due to its insurgency in South Eastern Nigeria as well as “a litany of problems with the social media platform in Nigeria, where misinformation and fake news spread through it have had real world violent consequences” (BBC News. 2 June 2021). According to Lai Mohammed, Minister of Information “I want to repeat that it is because Twitter has consistently made its platform available to those who are threatening Nigeria's corporate existence , that is the reason for suspending their operations in Nigeria” (The Cable, June 9 2021, 11:11pm). Twitter claimed that the tweet made by President Buhari had violated its rules against “abusive behavior” (Njoku, Olumide, Daka, Ugoeze, Abuh, Nzor and Osibe, 2021).. In response, Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, accused Twitter of double standard claiming that other individuals and groups also make inciting tweets but ignored by Twitter (Eze, Taiwo, Obi & Nweje, 2021)

This ban was perceived by many as an infringement into human right of the citizens, including right to freedom of speech and expression. The EU, US, Britain, Canada and Ireland said, “banning system of expression is not the answer, precisely, the moment when Nigeria needs

to foster inclusive dialogue and expression of opinions, as well as share vital information in this time of Covid-19 pandemic” (The Guardian, Tuesday, June 8, 2021, p.9). In a statement, Chairman of the Association of Licenced Telecom Operation of Nigeria (ALTON), Gbenga Adebayo, and Executive Secretary, Gbolahan Awonuga, said, “as an industry, we endorse the position of the United Nations that the rights held by people offline must also be protected online. This includes respecting and protecting the rights of all people to communicate, to share information freely and responsibly, and to enjoy privacy and security regarding their data and their use of digital communication” (Adebayo and Awonuga, 2021). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator, Samantha Power, said the suspension was nothing more than state sanctioned denial of free speech and therefore should be reversed immediately (Paulinus and Obi 2021). On 5th of June, 2021, US Diplomatic Mission issued a statement where it said the suspension of Twitter operation in Nigeria was an infringement on the rights of Nigerians to freedom of expression (Daily Sun, Thursday, June 10, 2021. P.6).

Governor Samuel Orton of Benue State, states that the suspension of Twitter in Nigeria is a ploy to distract Nigerians from the Federal Government of Nigeria’s failure to address insecurity. He further stated that the ban is illegal, suppression of the fundamental rights of Nigerians and a gag on social media (Orji & Ejemba, 2021). The US Ambassador to Nigeria, Mary Beth Leonard, on June 7, 2021, in a meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs Geoffrey Onyema, in response to a question concerning joint the joint statement, said that the missions have not changed their stance, “we remain firm in our position that free access to the ability to express one’s self is actually very important, and perhaps, even more important in troubled times” (Paulinus & Obi, 2021).

However, while some applauded the action, others criticized it vehemently stating that this action is a gross infringement into the human rights of the citizens. This ban was seen by many as a contradiction to section 39 of the amended 1999 constitution. This paper therefore sought to understand the publics/users perception about this as it infringes or affects their freedom of expression..

Based on the foregoing, the objectives of this study are to :

1. Find out the purpose for which Nigerian's use Twitter
2. Find out the perception of the people on the Twitter ban in Nigeria and the people's view on the effect of Twitter ban on freedom of expression in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Uses and Gratification Theory propounded by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1974 (Musa, Azni and Ismail, 2015). The underlying assumption of the theory is that those who consume media products do so because there are needs which they desire to satisfy (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). McQuail (2010) states that the theory could be traced from the early 1940's when researchers started investigating why people listen to popular radio programmes and why they read newspapers daily. As a result, the theory emerged in response to the needs of explanation to why people use certain media and the benefit they get from them.

According to Asemah (2011), the basic assumption of the Uses and Gratification theory is that people use mass media for different reasons and seek to derive various gratifications. However, the emergence of social media technologies changes the way people use mass media as they differ in form and context (Akpan, C. & Ekpe, B. 2018). Social media audiences have the advantage and freedom to actively seek for information and many many messages that are of interest and benefit to them.. people use social mdia to satisfy their cognitive needs, affective

needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, tension release needs, and medium appeal needs (Li, 2015). As a result of this, social media become a fertile research field demonstrating the direct relevance of the Uses and Gratification theory and its participants (Matei, 2010).

This theory is important because it focuses on the media recipient (the audience) as people with the discretion to use or not to use media platforms. When the people of Nigeria use social media platform such as Twitter, they have some needs which they desire to meet, therefore, banning the citizens from using the media platform (Twitter) is seen as an infringement into the human right of the citizens. Meeting those needs due to the usage of the Twitter platform can as well be regarded as a gratification that Nigerians derive in their utilization of the social media.

Method

This study used focus group discussion I conducted a series of focus group discussions.. The findings are based on three focus group discussion (FGD) (ranging from five to eight participants each) with experts, average Twitter users, and non users in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The FGDs were conducted in Port Harcourt, the State Capital of Rivers State and which is the second largest port of Nigeria. This discussions held in three communities which are Choba, Rumuokoro, and Rumuagholu. Each focus group discussion lasted one to two hours. Being resident in Port Harcourt for over two decades, combined with my years of research experience in the state, I used a snowballing method and purposely include a range of respondents from diverse social, economic, gender, ethnic, and geographic backgrounds..

The researcher acknowledge the limitations of this method. The research participants were not randomly selected, as a results are not generalizable. In order to curtail the effect or

mitigate the effects of non-randomness, I selected a wide range of people from different social, economic, ethnic, religious and geographical backgrounds for my sample. Despite the differences among my participants, there are some surprising and important things which I found in their answers about the ban of Twitter and their perceptions of it.

This increases my confidence that my findings are representative of a broader group of people than those I was able to interview as part of a focus group. The informal approach was taken to make them feel relaxed and less apprehensive rather than feeling as if they were being interviewed.

Findings

For what purpose do Nigerians' use Twitter?

Majority of the participants confirmed using Twitter as a medium of expression. They see Twitter as a platform for information consumption. They use Twitter for a variety of reasons ranging from interacting with family and friends, getting ideas for their business, some said they look for religious, community and political events (e.g., a Journalist said he used Twitter for political reporting), or for relaxation / leisure and to share their activities, events or programmes. Some participants said they use Twitter to post opinions on politics, the economy and current events.

According to another participant, a post graduate student "Twitter has concise information, which is key when you don't have time to inform yourself, so you read more or less the information on Twitter and more or less you get an idea. Even if it's not detailed, at least you know what is trending". Despite their differences in reason for Twitter usage, they all agreed it made getting information easy, and that Twitter has rapidly risen in prominence more than any other social media in political reporting. Most of the people who participated in the discussion

said they use twitter for political news, and said it was their primary source of news. This is in line with the findings of Brands et al., 2018, Broersma and Graham, 2012 that says that there is a growing reliance in news reporting on tweets from political leaders, along with posts from ordinary citizens. Only a few said they did not use Twitter to access news. Instead, they reported watching television, listening to radio or reading newspapers either privately owned or government publications.

Twitter users affirmed that the platform can be used to spread disinformation and hate speech. Majority of the participants acknowledged that Twitter can be used to spread misinformation or fake news, their ways to ascertain the truthfulness of a message differs. Another participant said that “Twitter educates, improves and creates awareness about political activities” and added that most of that information is useful, but that the platform has also been used to spread “hateful messages against some people or groups”. A student acknowledged that some news on Twitter is “fake” and he uses his instinct and his knowledge of the sources to help him assess credibility. Another, (a business man) said “I use people I trust, my opinion leaders, tweets of government official pages, spokespersons of political parties.”. One Civil Servant Officer (a woman) said that she focuses on the tone of the tweet post, “especially if they are too one sided and extreme, I can say they are fake, sometimes they manipulate photos and images”. Others say they rely on their intuition.

A young Muslim man said he tries to confirm viral information by finding corroborating coverage from other sources “if some tweets on a particular issue is getting out of hand or becoming too big, I look for the information elsewhere”. Another Christian said, “sometimes by merely looking at a tweet and the way it is presented, I know whether it is fake or not.” Some said they relied on the opinion of family members, friends and opinion leaders. An elderly man,

a Christian said members of his family and colleagues often ask him for latest information/news and to help them determine if such information is trustworthy.

Another participant who is a non user of Twitter said information especially coming from the government should be trusted “because it is by the government”. Twitter users affirmed that the platform can be used to spread disinformation and hate speech. They acknowledged that Twitter can be used both positively and negatively. A participant said “most people, use not just Twitter but the social media platforms for fraudulent activities especially since basic information such as name, age, gender, profession, location, workplace etc. are voluntarily shared on the social media platform, such personal details have been used by hackers, criminals, advertising agents etc. without users consent. A lady said she found traditional news media to be more reliable than social media, “because there is proper gatekeeping, they need to check information before they are printed, otherwise, they can be sued for incorrect information”.

It was found out that the use of Twitter ranges from business, to political news, sources of news, information dissemination and seeking etc. whether used for positive content, negative content or mixed content, findings shows that the use of Twitter by Nigerians (young or old) is increasing rapidly as in other parts of the world.

What is the perception of the people on the Twitter ban in Nigeria?

Majority of the participants did not support the ban of Twitter and sees it as a gross infringement of human right. A man said “this is borne out of personal ego, show of power and is unconstitutional”. Nevertheless. A few participants showed concern about the rate of spread of fake news, misinformation, not just on Twitter in particular but on social media platforms generally. Another participant (a religious leader) said “we should not be looking for who to blame our problems on, Twitter is not responsible for dividing or uniting people, but rather the

platform was reflecting a divided society”. Another participant said the action was rather frustrating, inhuman and sheer pride, he went further to say “I totally disagree with the government action as this is an infringement into human right, especially to freedom of expression, in fact, this is like truncating the media, until the media is free, we can’t have a free society”.

According to a man who identified himself as a political activist said “this is anarchy, lawlessness on the part of the government. Same people that make law are the ones breaking them. I see this as a sign of return of authoritarian government and is really worrisome”. Another participant is of the opinion that Twitter ban was violation of the right to freedom of speech and expression in the Section 39 of the Nigerian Constitution as well as questions the true democratic system of government of which Nigeria is practicing. According to another participant (a female student) “threats everywhere, you talk problem, you don’t talk problem, I was disgusted when I heard the news about the ban of Twitter because I felt the reason given for its ban does not justify the action”.

A participant said “This looks like a helpless situation, any nation that enjoys freedom of expression and press freedom helps citizens remain better informed about the happenings in their environment and also make government accountable. In Nigeria, we are still far from press freedom and freedom of expression, where one is intimidated, bullied, jailed or killed for expressing or stating one’s mind, especially if what is said does not go down well with the ruling class. Until you are free, you cannot set another free. In short, this days I am very careful with what I say both openly and secretly, I am still young, I have and love my family, am not ready to die young, all I can say is that it is well with Nigeria” .

However, another participant justified the actions of the government and said, “we don’t want another civil war (referring to the civil war that took place in the country from 1967 – 1970 between Biafra and Nigeria). It is only those that did not experience the Nigerian civil war that will be clamoring for another one or something that looks like it”. Another said, i don’t believe that the ban was a total infringement of human right for freedom of expression as Twitter is not the only source or avenue for expression. We should allow the government to do their job. Anything government feels that they can do to bring about peace and unity in this nation, let them do it. I am totally in support of that action by government, let’s see if there could be some sanity in this nation. For the fact that there is freedom of expression, does not give people the impetus to start talking carelessly without being cautious of the implication of what they are saying. I support government to ban any social media that allow its platform to be a channel for causing disorderliness in my nation Nigeria”.

Discussion

My findings shows that Twitter plays a vital role in Nigeria and is seen as an important avenue for expression. majority of the citizens rely on Twitter for information dissemination. It is one of the major sources of news. It was also discovered that majority of the people are critical and not supportive of the action of the government as their right to freedom of expression was curtailed by that ban.

The right to freedom of speech and expression is a valid constitutional right not just in Nigeria but globally against oppression and discrimination to any human being. If one’s freedom of speech and expression is tampered with, it can affect other human right of the individual. There’s a saying that “*a closed mouth is a closed destiny*”. Not allowing people to express themselves is equivalent to shutting them up in life. Twitter ban left a negative perception in the

minds of the people. There is deteriorating human rights situation in the country. Based on this, my findings are consistent with previous research, Obiora & Onwughalu (2018) showed that under the present dispensation and administration, there is deteriorating human rights provisions. They further add that various reports by national and international human rights groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, have continued to indict the government for wanton violations of human rights provisions. These bodies rated Nigeria low since 2015.

Though individual differences on the ban are observed, the differences found can best be explained by the different perception of the action of the government by individual public/user. The effect of the ban if not checked may result in increased violence like the #Endsars protest in Nigeria due to several factors. The truth is that whether used for positive content, negative content or mixed content, the use of Twitter is increasing rapidly as in other parts of the world .

Conclusion

A lot of social networking sites has sprung up including Twitter to aid in communication and information dissemination. The citizens, press and government are making use of this mode of communication in exercising their human right to freedom of expression. banning Twitter was seen as truncating the right of the people to speak and be heard as well as to express themselves freely. Many see this as an addition to the constant harassment and intimidation faced by not just the journalist but the vulnerable people. Until there is a free press, freedom of expression still remains an illusion in Nigeria.

Every administration should embark on a fruitful journey by recognizing and appreciating the importance of freedom of expression and press freedom and knowing that any society that does not embrace this is bound to fail in many aspects, especially protection of human rights. However, although the ban has been lifted, it lasted for seven (7) months, there is a

possibility that this would happen again if the intensity of negative contents continues. The government might likely restrict the use of Twitter or any other social media platform.

Recommendations

1. Policy makers should have guidelines for use of Twitter and make it open to the general public, such that statement's that will be inciting the public for lawlessness will not be there, nor publicly abusing the government, showing acts of insubordination and abusing the freedom of expression.
2. The government needs a comprehensive plan to counter misinformation from online platforms.
3. Digital literacy campaign is encouraged.
4. Information that generate peace should be encouraged and those that will create crisis should be discouraged.
5. Freedom of speech should have guidelines.
6. Best code of conduct to be developed.

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