

Freedom of Expression and the Ban on Twitter Usage by the Federal Government of Nigeria: Audience Perception



Ngozi Comfort Omojunikanbi, PhD[∞]

Abstract

Press freedom, freedom of speech and expression is perceived to 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. 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 personalities. The aim of this study therefore is to seek out the users who expressed concern about this and interview them to expand our knowledge of their concerns as it infringes/affects human right to freedom of speech. 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 perceptions of the action of the government by individual users.

Keywords: Freedom, expression, Twitter, users, Nigeria, ban

Introduction

Freedom of expression is the ability of 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 expressions 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, apply 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"

[∞] Ngozi Comfort Omojunikanbi, PhD, Department of Journalism and Media Studies, University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. Email: ngozi.omojunikanbi@uniport.edu.ng

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 friends, and colleagues keep up with one another through status updates. Users are allowed to receive and send short messages called Tweets. It's a micro-blogging system. Twitter also allows users to come across the latest news, events, and happenings as well as events people follow (Hubspot, 2020). Twitter recorded 330,000,000 monthly active users in the first quarter of 2019 and daily tweets of over 500 million worldwide (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 sourcing news (Pew Center, 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 Twitter's advertising resources). This figure means that Twitter's ad reach in Nigeria was equivalent to 22 per cent 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 income, and campaign/advocacy. Twitter serves as a platform for people to express their opinions freely without fear or prejudice. Research points to a growing reliance on news reporting on tweets from political leaders, along with posts from ordinary citizens (Brands et al., 2018, Broersma & 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, and U-Tube, etc. More than any other social media platform, Twitter has rapidly risen to prominence in Journalists' political reporting toolkit (McGregor & Molyneux, 2018, Metag & Rauchfleisch, 2017; Parmelee, 2014). Social media are technologically based innovations that expand information, ideas, and messages, expose crime and bring about the development of communities (Atinuke & Oluwaseyi, 2017). Social media have advanced development through their 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 the circulation of hate speech, fake news, misleading information, several wicked/cyber crimes, online violence, fraud etc. The Federal Government of Nigeria felt that these were threats to democracy and the peaceful co-existence of the citizens. However, this ban came two days after Twitter deleted Tweets made by the President, Muhammadu Buhari on the President's official handle @MBuhari where he warned 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 platforms 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, 11:11 pm). Twitter claimed that the tweet made by President Buhari had violated its rules against "abusive behaviour" (Njoku, Olumide, Daka, Ugoeze, Abuh, Nzor & Osibe, 2021). In response, Minister of Information and Culture, Lai Mohammed, accused Twitter of a double standard claiming that other individuals and groups also make inciting tweets but are ignored by Twitter (Eze, Taiwo, Obi & Nweje, 2021)

This ban was perceived by many as an infringement on the human rights of the citizens, including the 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). According to the Chairman of the Association of Licenced Telecom Operation of Nigeria (ALTON), Gbenga Adebayo, and Executive Secretary, Gbolahan Awonuga, "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 & Awonuga, 2021). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator, Samantha Power, said the suspension was nothing more than a state-sanctioned denial of free speech and therefore should be reversed immediately (Paulinus & Obi 2021). On the 5th of June, 2021, the US Diplomatic Mission issued a statement where it said the suspension of the 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 Geofrey Onyema, in response to a question concerning 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 of 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 audience's 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 Nigerians use Twitter
2. find out the perception of the audience on the Twitter ban in Nigeria and their view on the effect of the Twitter ban on freedom of expression in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the 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 that they desire to satisfy (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). McQuail (2010) states that the theory could be traced from the early 1940s 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 need for an explanation as to why people use certain media and the benefits 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, & Ekpe, 2018). Social media audiences have the advantage and freedom to actively seek information and many messages that are of interest and benefit to them. People use social media 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 platforms 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 rights 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 Discussions (FGDs). The findings are based on three (FGDs) (ranging from five to eight participants each) with experts, and average Twitter users, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The FGDs were conducted in Port Harcourt, the State Capital of Rivers State. These discussions were held in three communities which are Choba, Rumuokoro, and Rumuagholu. Each focus group discussion lasted one to two hours.

I selected a wide range of people from different social, economic, ethnic, religious and geographical backgrounds for my sample.

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, and 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 postgraduate 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, and Broersma & Graham, 2012 who say that there is a growing reliance on 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 the 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, but their ways of ascertaining the truthfulness of a message differ. 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 businessman) 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 the 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, and otherwise, and they can be sued for incorrect information".

It was found 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 show 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 on Twitter and saw it as a gross infringement of human rights. A man said, "This is borne out of personal ego, the show of power and is unconstitutional". Nevertheless. A few participants showed concern about the rate of spread of fake news, and 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 of human rights, 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. The same people who make the law are the ones breaking it. I see this as a sign of the return of authoritarian government and is really worrisome". Another participant thinks that the Twitter ban was a violation of the right to freedom of speech and expression in 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 makes the 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, these 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 clamouring for another one or something that looks like it". Another said, "I don't believe that the ban was a total infringement of the human right to 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 the government, let's see if there could be some sanity in this nation. 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 the government to ban any social media that allows its platform to be a channel for causing disorderliness in my nation Nigeria".

Discussion

Findings show 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 the 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 of any human being. If one's freedom of speech and expression is tampered with, it can affect other human rights of the individual. Not allowing people to express themselves is equivalent to shutting them up in life. Twitter's ban left a negative perception in the minds of the people. According to the participant, there is a deteriorating human rights situation in the country. Based on this, findings are consistent with previous research, Obiora & Onwughalu (2018) showed that under the present dispensation and administration, there are deteriorating human rights provisions. They further add that various reports by national and international human rights groups such as Amnesty International, and 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 perceptions of the action of the government by individual public/users. The effect of the ban if not checked may result in increased violence like the #Endsars protest in Nigeria.

Conclusion

A lot of social networking sites have 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 journalists but the vulnerable people.

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 the protection of human rights. However, although the ban has been lifted, it lasted for seven (7) months, and there is a possibility that this will happen again if the intensity of negative content continues. The government might likely restrict the use of Twitter or any other social media platform.

Recommendations

1. Policymakers should have guidelines for the use of Twitter and make it open to the general public.
2. The government needs a comprehensive plan to counter misinformation from online platforms.
3. Digital literacy campaign is encouraged.
4. Information that generates peace should be encouraged and those that will create crisis should be discouraged.
5. Freedom of speech should have guidelines.

References

- Amnesty International (2020). Nigeria: Education under attack in the North. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/12/nigeria-education-underattack-in-the-north/>
- Amnesty International (2015). Nigeria: Abducted women and girls forced to join Boko haram attacks. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/new/2015/04/nigeria-abducted-women-and-girls-forced-to-join-boko-haram-attacks/>
- Aniefiok U., &Omojunikanbi, N.C (2018). Press freedom and two years of Buhari administration. Integrity in Reporting: A Reader in Aniefiok Udoudo & Chris Ochonogor (eds). Journalism Educators Foundation (JEF), Pp 396 - 408.
- Asemah, E.S. (2011). *Selected mass media themes*. Jos: University Press,
- Atinuke, O. A. &Oluwaseyi, F. V. (2017). Self-affirmation discourse on the effectiveness of radio in the era of the new media in Nigeria. *NOVENA Journal of Communication*. 3, 183-191
- Brands, B.J., Graham, T., and Broersma M. (2018). Social media sourcing practices: how Dutch Newspapers use tweets in political news coverage. In: Schwanzholz J, Graham T. and Stoll T.T (eds) *Managing Democracy in the Digital age: Internet regulation, Social Media Use, and Online Civic Engagement*: Chem: Springer, pp. 159-178
- Branston, G. & Stafford, R. (2007). *The media students' book*. New York: Routledge
- Broersma M and Graham T. (2012). Social media as beat: tweets as news sources during the 2010 British and Dutch elections. *Journalism Practice* 6(3); 403-419
- Dominick, J.R. (2011). *The dynamics of mass communication: media in transition*, New York: McGraw Hill
- Economic and Social Research Council. (2020, January 20). Retrieved from UKRI: <http://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/social-media/twitter/what-is-twitter/>
- Eze, M., Taiwo, J., Obi, O.O. &Nweje, C. (2021). FG fumes as Twitter pulls down Buhari's civil war Tweets. *Daily Sun*, 17 (4723) p.6
- Hubspot. (2020, January 20). Retrieved from hubspot.com: <http://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/what-is-twitter>
- Ihejirika, W. (2011). The importance of information in public administration in Nigeria. Paper presented at a two-day training workshop on the nascent Freedom of Information Act, organized by Trinity Media Consults Abuja, 5-6 October 2011, at Ascot Resort, New Haven Enugu, Enugu State.
- Iyatse, G. &Adepetun, A. (2021) \$12b e-commerce suffers as Twitter ban costs =N=7.5 billion in three days. *The Guardian*, June 7, 37 (15,502) pp. 1-2
- Katz, E., Blumler, J. &Gurevitch, M. (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds). *The uses of mass communication: current perspectives on gratification research* (pp. 19-34) Beverly Hills, CA; sage
- Li, C. &Bernoff, J. (2008). *Winning in a world transformed by social technologies*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.
- Matei, S.A. (2010). What can uses and gratification theory tell us about social media? <https://matei.org/think/what-can-uses-and-gratification-theory-tellus->
- McGregor, SC and Molyneux L. (2018). Twitter's influence on news judgement: an experiment among journalists. Journalism. Epub ahead of print 5 October
- McQuail, D. (2010). *Mass communication theory*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications Ltd.

- Metag, J and Rauchfleisch, A. (2017). Journalists' use of political tweets: functions for journalist work and the role of perceived influences. *Digital Journalism* 5(9): 1155 - 1172
- Musa, A. S., Azmi, M. N. & Ismail, N. S. (2015) Exploring the uses and gratification theory in the use of social media among the students of mass communication in Nigeria. *Malaysian Journal of Distance Education*, 17(2), 83-95
- Njoku, L., Olumide, S., Daka, T., Ugoeze, N.O., abuh, A., Nzor, C., &Osibe, O. (2021). Fireworks, Anger trail Buhari's "shock threat" to secessionists. *The Guardian*, 37 (15498), p.1-2
- Nwankwo, V. C. (2011). The role of the media in promoting human rights: an analysis of the BBC Documentary, Chocolate The Bitter Truth. A dissertation submitted to the Department of Socio Anthropology, Roethampton University.
- Ominicore. (2020, January 20) Retrieved from ominicore.com: <https://www.ominicoreagency.com/twitter-statistics/>
- Omojunikanbi, Ngozi C. (2021). Social media & #Endsars protest: select Nigerian online Newspapers framing of #Endsars protest in Nigeria. *ESUT Journal of Accountancy*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp 12 - 22.
- Omojunikanbi, N.C &Anyeji U.L (2022) The impact of social media communication on HIV/AIDS amongst young adults in the South-East of Nigeria. *Benin Mediacom Journal*, No.16, Issue 2, pp.161 - 178.
- Orji, N. &Ejemba, R. (2021). Ban meant to distract Nigerians from Federal government's failure on security. *Ortom*(4728), p.7
- Parmelee J. H (2014) The agenda building of political tweets. *New Media & Society* 16(3): 434 - 450.
- Paulinus, A. & Obi, O. U.S, Nigerians in Diaspora call for ban reversal. *Daily Sun*, 17 (4729), p.6
- PewResearch Centre. (2020, January 20). Retrieved from journalism.org: <https://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/>
- Statista. (2020), January 19). Retrieved from statista.com: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/972907/number-of-social-network-users-in-nigeria/>
- YCHARTS (2020, January 20). Retrieved from ycharts.com: https://ycharts.com/companies/TWTR/enterprise_value.