Twitter Ban in Nigeria: A Stigma To Democratic Governance

Rotimi Oluwatosin Goodness*, Kester C. Onor, Gyuse Terdoo Sandra, & Sheriff F. Folarin

Department of Political Science and International Relations
Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria

Received: April 17, 2022; Reviewed: April 17, 2022; Accepted: May 17, 2022

Abstract

Twitter’ in the 21st century has become a useful tool for information gathering, sharing, and interactions amongst individuals and diplomatic negotiations between governments across the world. The potency along the communication lines of Twitter lies in its ability to reach a wide and diversified audience quickly and simultaneously. Most intriguing is that individuals through public opinion on Twitter hold governments accountable for their actions. With the application of libertarian theory, the prohibition of Twitter in Nigeria is investigated empirically in this study. Drawing on secondary sources of data collection, the findings of the study revealed that regardless of the enormous prospects and economic relevance of Twitter in Nigeria, the Twitter ban is an undemocratic act and an utter infringement on freedom of expression and access to information sharing which constitute fundamental human rights. The study concluded by stating that the Nigerian government should revert the ban on Twitter and restore the digital right of Nigerian residents to the platform. The study recommended that democratic institutions should be more consolidated so that the rule of law can be guaranteed. In addition, given that Nigeria is said to be a democratic country, rather than infringing on rights to freedom of speech and expression by controlling, banning, or censoring social media activities, the Nigerian government can opt for press conferences, press releases, and even social media platforms to communicate with a larger crowd on brewing social issues.

Keywords: Democracy; Governance; Human Rights; Social Media; Twitter.


*Corresponding author:
E-mail: rotimigoodnesst@gmail.com

ISSN 2085-0328 (Print)
ISSN 2684-9305(Online)
INTRODUCTION

The internet has become one of the most significant technological revolutions of the 21st century, with a vast portion of the world's population having access to it. Progressively prevalent is the fact that the utilization of social media for convenient, quick, cost-effective sharing of key information and ideas amongst individuals via online media cannot be over-emphasized (Samur, 2019). Social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram amongst others allows users to create a web-based identity that allows for quick communication. In this regard, Twitter in today's society has become a significant tool because of the enormous role it plays on a global scale (Santas & Ogoshi, 2016).

In Nigeria, Twitter has been used as a platform for various forms of diplomacy and for business owners and corporate organizations to market their services. Most commonly, Nigerians use Twitter to voice out their opinions and exercise their rights to freedom of speech on issues that are societally or politically inclined (Chakrabarti, 2018). However, irrespective of Twitter's enormous relevance, the federal government of Nigeria on 4th June 2021 released a news report putting a halt to Twitter service in Nigeria's media space (Enoch, 2021). The event that resulted in the federal government's decision was because a tweet made by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari was deleted. Twitter noted that the tweet made by the president had violated Twitter usage policy hence Twitter policy action (Daniel, Ngozi & Daniel, 2021).

The tweet read:

"Many of those misbehaving today are too young to be aware of the destruction and loss of lives that occurred during the Nigerian Civil War. Those of us who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand."

Furthermore, the Nigerian government's justification for the suspension of Twitter within the country, in the press release stated that Nigeria's corporate existence could be undermined by the continued usage of the platform (Anyim, 2021). Also included in the press statement was a directive for the National Broadcasting Commission and the National Communications Commission to license all Over-The-Top and social media services and to license all telecommunications providers respectively in Nigeria (Enoch, 2021). Under the executive order, on June 6, NBC instructed broadcasting networks to immediately cease usage of their institution's Twitter accounts. The office of the attorney general of Nigeria also urged swift indictment of Nigerians who circumvent the ban (Daniel et al, 2021).

From the foregoing, given that there is no constitutional backing for the decision taken by the Nigerian government, the press release issued by the Nigerian government presents a myriad of concerns that can be looked at from the viewpoint of an infringement on human rights as embedded in section 33-44 of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria as amended. It encompasses fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association, online assembly, and information accessibility (Enoch, 2021). The core value of a democratic state should be the safeguarding of the fundamental rights of its citizens and not otherwise (Olanye-Okonofua, 2021). In light of the above, the study investigates the Twitter ban in Nigeria as a stigma to democratic governance.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data used for this study were gotten from secondary sources like the internet, journal articles, newspaper publications, conference proceedings, and books among others. These data were organized in themes using textual analysis. A major significance of this research paper is the adoption of data triangulation from the secondary sources mentioned above. This is grounded on the opinions of White (2000) in Ibiietan Abasilim, & Olobio (2018) who proposed that if the same data collection method is gotten from different sources that have been published at different times, it could be referred to as 'data triangulation'. Combining the analytical tool above with libertarian theory as a framework informs the findings, discussions, and recommendations of the study.

The concept of democracy has over time been a prominent subject of debate by various scholars who have attempted to look at it from different standpoints. The word 'democracy' which is widely regarded as the world's most famous form of government originates from the Greek word "demokratia" (Demo- 'people' and kratia- 'authority') meaning 'rule by the people' (Santas & Ogoshi, 2016). Most popularly, drawing from the definition of Abraham
Lincoln, democracy is regarded as government of the people, by the people, and for the people (Enoch, 2021). According to Beckett (2019), democracy is a governing concept that emphasizes basic freedoms and human rights of citizens, rights to ownership of property, the rule of law, and the right to vote and be voted for. Anderson & Rainie, (2020) opine that democracy is a political system where the rule of law, constitutionalism, and majority rule are fundamental tenets of governance. Santas & Ogoshi (2016) conclude by stating that in the case of Nigeria, rather than the majority having a voice in the governing process, a few elites have taken control of the state of affairs. However, an attempt to oppose the powers that be (authorities), would amount to a terrible violation of the innocent and suffering people's rights under the constitution.

Edogiawerie (2013) classifies democracy into two major types namely: 1) Direct democracy; 2) Indirect democracy. Muskaj (2019) opines that under direct democracy, all citizens of the state take part in the assembly and have equal rights to participate in making decisions for the governance of the state. This according to him was commonly practiced in the ancient Greek cities. It is said to have also been in practice under the Igbo tradition during the pre-colonial administration of Nigeria. On the other hand, Hoffman (2014) states that indirect democracy can be considered from a standpoint where citizens through the instrument of elections, choose who will spearhead, make decisions, and govern the state on behalf of the populace. Bullock (2014) elaborates by stating that the indirect form of democracy was introduced as a replacement for the direct form of democracy in the modern states. This was meant to fill up the void that the direct form of democracy presented. Large numbers of people made it difficult for everyone to actively participate in the governing process of the state under direct democracy.

Moving forward, Danjuma et al (2021) highlights six (6) basic features of democracy to be: 1) Regard for fundamental human rights; 2) Regard to rule of law; 3) Active participation of citizen; 4) Multi-party political system; 5) Democratic governance; 6) Democratic voting system

He argues that the aforementioned features of democracy indicate 'strong democracy' and should be taken seriously by the state. The foregoing implies that any government that adopts the culture of democracy as well as its many features thus encouraging popular participation directly or indirectly will excel.

Although there is no universally accepted definition for the term "social media", several scholars have attempted to conceptualize the term from different perspectives. Ajayi & Sola (2019) refers to 'social media' as a variety of ways to communicate and interact with others. Fasae & Adegbilero-Iwari (2016) from another point of view posit that social media are 'internet' platforms that allow anyone to create a semi-public presence within a limited framework. Social media according to Apuke & Tunca (2018) are online technologies and websites that promote numerous communication exchanges amongst users. More specifically, Dewing (2012) defines social media as a variety of mobile and web-based services designed to enable users to engage in online conversations, connect with online communities and contribute user-generated content. Twitter, Telegram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram among others are examples of existing social media platforms.

Social media allows for the operational generation, sharing, and dissemination of information by enabling flows of knowledge and ideas. Social media is mostly utilized to disseminate or distribute information with a large audience and this makes social networking which has been characterized as a device for connecting with others easier (Quadri & Adebayo, 2016). Here, social networking means that people with common interests across geopolitical divides relate with one another and build relationships. This encapsulates the most common activities that take place on social media (Ajayi & Sola, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION
Libertarian Theory

This study adopts the libertarian theory, which is also referred to as free press theory as its analytical framework. Following the creation of the printing press and the movement of the press in the 16th century, the theory arose from Europe’s libertarian thoughts. Renowned philosophers like John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Lao Tzu among others advocated this theory in Europe and
America (Shraddha, 2018). Most recently, the libertarian theory is associated with the works of scholars like Muller (2019), Ogbebor (2020), Ohusola (2020), Zankova & Dimitrov (2020) in their various studies on freedom for all forms of media in the society and a democratic system particularly.

The major assumption of the libertarian theory as postulated by Muller (2019) is that the press or all forms of media should be granted complete freedom to publish information at any given time and serve as a watchdog to the activities of the state. Another assumption of libertarian theory is that the institution of the state must not censor, restrict or suppress the activities of the media (Ogbebor, 2020). According to Shraddha (2018), there should be a constant stream of all kinds of information where everyone is subject to interpreting and deciding whatever information, they require as well as its authenticity. To him, an individual’s rationality enables them to do so.

For this study, the application of the libertarian theory would mean that since Nigeria is considered a democratic state where freedom of speech and expression should be encouraged, the Nigerian government has no right to control, censor, and ban the activities of any form of media. The work of Anyim (2021) in this regard reveals that the move to ban Twitter from Nigeria’s media space is a breach of the constitutional rights of expression of Nigerian residents and a shame to democracy. Adegbwura (2021) argues that the action on the Twitter ban is perilous and no democratic government should try to restrain its media space, be it traditional or social media because it is unethical to oversee those who hold you (the government) accountable.

The Right To Liberty Of Speech And Expression

Nigeria is a party to the agreement to Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which mandates that states assure the right to speak freely, which also means the option to pursue, obtain, and instill all kinds of opinions and expertise throughout all media, notwithstanding the boundaries. Article 19 of the ICCPR allows restrictions: 1) It must be supplied by legislation that is explicit and available to everybody (predictability and transparency standards); It must work to achieve one of the purposes set out in Article 19(3) of the Covenant and It must be demonstrated that it is a necessary and least restrictive way of achieving the stated goal (principles of necessity and proportionality).

The UN Human Rights Committee states that "any restrictions on the operation of websites, blogs, or other internet-based electronic or other comparable communication and information methods" should comply with Article 19. The State bears the burden of establishing that a restriction on freedom of expression fits the three-part requirements described above (Diamond 2010).

For various reasons, the Ban unnecessarily limits freedom of expression in violation of international law: 1) The suspension of Twitter has no legal justification. The suspension appears to have been issued by presidential fiat, which does not meet the legality premise of Article 19's three-part test. As a result, the Nigerian government should make the legal foundation for the recent Press release public for citizens to understand the scope of power and their choices for redress; 2) Second, the Ban does not fulfill a legitimate goal as defined by Article 19(3) of the ICCPR. One of the listed goals for permitted limitations is to prevent Twitter from being used to harm state business interests; 3) Third, a blanket ban on Twitter is an overreaction since it does not sufficiently target the illegal speech that is to be repressed, instead of barring access to a whole online platform. This is a breach of Nigeria's ICCPR and ACHPR agreements. State actions that restrict or censor content disseminated via the internet in a way that is unnecessary or inadequate, as per the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and maintenance of life and personal liberty, are inconsistent with States' responsibilities under the universal declaration of human rights.

To summarize, the blanket prohibition is an unconstitutional limitation on online freedom of expression and other rights. Per its international commitments, the government should promptly rescind the order and, in collaboration with all stakeholders, develop steps to promote digital freedoms.

The Nexus Between Democracy And Social Media
Several recent studies have suggested that liberating technology like the internet, mobile phones, and social media can favorably affect democratic results (Saleh, 2012). In the last ten years, democracy has progressed. The limits that define the features of democracy in a state have considerably widened to allow less traditional and less official means of maintaining democracy. This is not surprising, given that the internet may be used both for democratization and authoritarianism (Morozov, 2012), showing that other elements, such as the involvement of civil society, may influence the link between the internet and internet-based technologies like social media and democracy. With social media's rise in popularity over the last decade, it has become a force that state officials can no longer ignore. Political campaigns, legislation, peacemaking, and allying events have all benefited from the utilization of social media (Aday, 2010). The link between social media and democracy has grown even more significant in light of the present global democratic trend reversal.

So, what influence does social media have on democracy? If social media has shown us much about society, it is that it emphasizes initiatives to promote, both good and bad. It enables us to articulate and operate to our full potential (Ugoeze, 2021). Citizens may now keep up with their government as readily as they do with their friends for the first time in human history. This would be releasing new waves of underlying civic energy and disseminating power to a wider range of people. Clearly, there are various challenges at the confluence of social media and democracy, but there are also countless opportunities; social media has tremendous potential to keep people informed, and adults get at least some of their information from social media (Adepetun, 2021).

Consequences Of Nigeria's Twitter Ban On Human Rights

Nigeria's Twitter ban, according to recent popular opinion, would have significant implications for people's civil rights. This section examines the viewpoints of a variety of political, commercial, religious, and international communities, as well as experts, on this subject. Information exchange, marketing information, and collaboration have never been easier thanks to Twitter and other social media sites. Millions of Nigerians, particularly the youth, rely on social media for communication, information sharing, and knowledge acquisition (Anyim, 2020). Nigeria's constitution and international human rights law safeguard the right to freedom of expression and access to information, as outlined in the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression in Africa, and any restrictions on this right must be justified in a democratic society (Ewang, 2021).

States should always ensure the right to freedom of expression, as well as the freedom to hold opinions without fear of retaliation, and the freedom to seek, receive, and transmit information and ideas of all kinds through any medium, regardless of borders, as of Nigeria's most recent ratification of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Diamond 2010). ALTON Chairman Gbenga Adebayo and Executive Secretary Gbolahan Arowo said in a statement. This involves honoring and preserving everyone's right to speak, exchange information freely and responsibly, and have privacy and security when it comes to personal data and digital communications" (Adebayo and Arowo 2021). The suspension, according to Samantha Power, USAID administrator, is nothing more than a state-sanctioned limitation on freedom of speech that should be reversed immediately (Paulinus and Obi, 2021). According to a statement issued by the US Diplomatic Mission in Nigeria on June 5, 2021, the suspension of Twitter operations in Nigeria constituted an infringement on Nigerians' right to freedom of speech. (Daily Sun, Thursday, June 10, 2021. P.6).

The US Ambassador to Nigeria, Mary Beth Leonard, responded to a query regarding the joint statement at a meeting with Nigerian Foreign Affairs Minister Geoffrey Onyema on June 7, 2021, by noting that the missions' positions had not changed. "We remain certain in our belief that unrestricted access to the freedom to express oneself is extremely vital, maybe even more so in these trying times," Leonard added (Obi, 2021). The suspension of Twitter, according to Benue State Governor Samuel Orton, is a ploy to distract Nigerians from the Federal Government's inability to address insecurity. He went on to claim that the ban is illegal, that it violates Nigerians' fundamental rights, and that it amounts to
social media censorship. (Orji and Ejemba, 2021) "Banning methods of expression is not the answer," the EU, US, UK, Canada, and Ireland declared during the COVID-19 pandemic (The Guardian, Tuesday, June 8, 2021, p.9). The Twitter ban, according to Valentine Ozigbo, a Nigerian business entrepreneur and worldwide sports producer, violates Nigerians' constitutional rights to free expression and information.

CONCLUSION

The study assessed the Twitter ban in Nigeria, noting that the action taken by the federal government of Nigeria is ignominious to a country that is supposedly meant to be governed by the tenets of democracy. The study found that where freedom of speech is muzzled by any means, it is impossible to credibly affirm the existence of a democratic system as such can be said to be a feature of authoritarian governments. A dictated policy on social media will have a severe influence on the media's ability to perform its duty as a watchdog and to provide for the public’s communication and information demands in the twenty-first century.

Findings of the study also revealed that apart from the ban on Twitter being shameful at the national, and international level, it posed a lot of disadvantages to the livelihood of all citizens, small, medium, and large-scale businesses as well as the economy at large. In addition, the study pointed out that because social media is a beneficial channel for expressing ideas and opinions and for addressing political activities in the country, it has the potential to play a significant role in consolidating democracy if used responsibly and patriotically. Hence, regulatory actions may be viewed as a pejorative to democratic ideals.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors are thankful to the Conference Organising Committee of Covenant University Conference on E-Business and E-Government in Nigeria (CUCEEN 2021) chaired by Dr. Ugochukwu D. Abasilim for providing this platform for the publication. Also, Covenant University Centre for E-Business and E-Government Research is highly appreciated for granting the approval for the publication of this article.

REFERENCES


Awe, J. (2021, June 3). FG Fumes as Twitter Pulls Down Buhari’s Civil War Tweet. Daily Sun,17(4723), P.6.


Eze, M.; Taiwo, J.; Obi, O. O. and Nweje, C. (2021, June 3). FG Fumes as Twitter Pulls Down Buhari’s Civil War Tweet. Daily Sun, 17 (4723), P.6


Orji, N. and Ejemba, R. (2021, June 9). Ban Meant to Distract Nigerians from FG’s Failure on Security, Ortom Tweets. DailySun, 17 (4728), P.7

FG suspends Twitter. Vanguard, 18 (9372), p.5