

Twitter Ban in Nigeria: The Aftermath Effect

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Abstract

This seminar paper focused on the recent Twitter Ban in Nigeria and the aftermath effect. It aimed at discussing the impact of the Twitter ban on the socioeconomic of the nation. It also took a sneak peek into the legality of the ban and how businesses are thriving after the ban. Sources of resource materials for the seminar paper were primary and secondary. The paper concluded by stating better ways the Federal Government can handle the issues of social media abuse.

Introduction

In the wake of June 5, 2021, the Federal government of Nigeria placed a ban on Twitter, micro-blogging platform. When the President Muhammadu Buhari-led administration first announced that it was placing a temporary ban on Twitter, it was the subject of ‘cruise and light banter’ for many Nigerian tweeps (Twitter users). However, months after the ban, Nigerians seem to have moved on.

The reality that the government was standing by its decision dawned on Nigerian when by midnight of June 5, the estimated 40 million Nigerian users of Twitter (The NOI Polls stated that 2 out of 10 internet users in Nigeria (over 39 million have a Twitter account) could not access their accounts. The ban came shortly three hours after the government issued the announcement.

The official Twitter handle of the Ministry of Information and Culture had cited unspecified activities on the social media platform that were deemed “capable of undermining Nigeria’s corporate existence.” Many tweeps were quick to relate the ban

as not being unconnected to the platform's decision to take down a tweet by the Nigerian president.

President Buhari, a former Brigade Major in the Nigerian civil war while warning secessionists few days before the ban had wrote in part, "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 in the fields for 30 months, who went through the war, will treat them in the language they understand," causing an uproar on the platform.

Having suffered the effects of the civil war from 1967 to 1970, the Igbo tribe of southeastern Nigeria as well as think-tanks, accused the president of posting a "genocidal statement" and called for a report of the tweet for abuse, which was effected immediately.

Apart from deleting the tweet, the president's account was left in a "read-only mode" for 12 hours. Days after, Nigeria announced a temporary ban and subsequently announced that the ban was indefinite. Unrelenting, Nigerians have turned to the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to continue to use the app with several voicing out their displeasure with the 'hasty action of the government.' There have been several opinions that the suspension is not only 'unconstitutional' but also a 'childish tantrum' by the government with Nigerians left to bear the brunt.

Admittedly, although the ruling party rode to victory in the 2015 presidential election with help from social media, the government has been vocal about the need to regulate social media. The Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed has several times blamed "the siege of disinformation and fake news" on social media.

Based on the above, the seminar paper aimed at taking an overview on Twitter ban in Nigeria and the aftermath of the ban. It intends to bring to academic knowledge the socioeconomic effects of the Twitter on the nation.

Twitter Ban in Nigeria: Issues and Facts

First, according to Oduniyi (2021), the ban constitutes a gross abuse of office, as it elevates the personal interest of the President above that of the country and her citizens. The President is indeed NOT the state and disagreements over the personal terms he voluntarily entered with Twitter should not be allowed to threaten the public and national interest. Moreover, we are not aware of any law of the federation that allows the President or a Minister to whimsically deny Nigerians access to social media services of their choice.

Secondly, the ban is a grave violation of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, which the trio of the President, the Minister of Information and the Minister of Justice swore to uphold. By infringing citizens' fundamental right to the freedom of expression and association, it violates section 39 of the Constitution, while undermining the social and economic rights guaranteed Nigerian citizens by Chapter 11 of the Constitution. Denis (2021)

Thirdly, the ban is a violation of and assault on a number of international, continental and regional instruments that Nigeria willingly subscribes to. Indeed, the ban clearly falls below their expectations of the realm of the rights and freedom that citizens should freely enjoy. Sunday (2021)

Among these are the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and the Universal Declaration of Peoples and Human Rights. Pursuant to the provisions of the African

Charter, Resolution 362 of 2016 of the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights expressed concern at the practice by State Parties to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, of “interrupting or limiting access to telecommunication services such as the Internet, social media and messaging services.”

In specific terms, the African Commission adopted the Declaration of Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information in Africa, Principle 38 (1) and (2) of which states that, “States shall not interfere with the right of individuals to seek, receive and impart information through any means of communication and digital technologies, through measures such as the removal, blocking or filtering of content, unless such interference is justifiable and compatible with international human rights law and standards.” And that “States shall not engage in or condone any disruption of access to the internet and other digital technologies for segments of the public or an entire population.” The UN Human Rights Council also has a subsisting resolution of July 2018 that demands the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet.

Fourthly, the ban constitutes an unwarranted attack on the corporate, business and professional interests of organizations and individuals legitimately managing their affairs on Twitter, including but not limited to the media, entrepreneurs, researchers, educational institutions, NGOs and CCSOs. As at the third quarter of 2020, Twitter accounted for 61.4 per cent of Internet users in Nigeria, coming after WhatsApp and Facebook messenger, according to ‘Statista’, while ‘Quora’ estimates the number to be about seven million. Even if the number of users is considerably less, it still does not justify a ban that is jeopardizing the means of business and social communication of citizens.

Fifthly, the ban further underscores the investor community's growing concern over the unpredictability of the domestic policy environment. The consequences of a subsequent attenuation of investment for an economy whose recovery from the initial stages of the pandemic has been described as "fragile" are better imagined.

In general, only a government that wants to shut itself from its own citizens would take the kind of bizarre step of banning a social media platform.

The Aftermath of Twitter Ban in Nigeria

The aftermath of Twitter ban in Nigeria is multidimensional. This is because the present generations have wrapped their lives around social media and this is the reality that stares us in the face. It would then be very difficult to separate social media of any kind from the people without any negative effect. This section centres on the socioeconomic effects of the Twitter ban in Nigeria.

According Peter (2021), the economic impact of Twitter ban is one that has been enormous on Nigeria. Three days after the twitter ban in Nigeria, the A4AI (Alliance for Affordable Internet) put Nigeria's economic loss at \$1.2b. A watchdog organization, Net Blocks, also remarked that each hour of the Nigerian government's decision cost \$250,000 (N102.5 million), bringing the daily loss to N2.5 billion. Minus COVID-19's impact on small and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), the e-commerce market in three days lost an estimated \$12 billion.

Many Nigerian businesses and individuals rely on the use of Twitter to support their operations and hustle. Many employers use Twitter to promote their job openings while online vendors also promote their businesses and services on the platform.

According to a report by FDI Intelligence in 2021, a specialist division of the Financial Times, in collaboration with research company Briter Bridges, Nigeria boasts of the largest number of startups in the Africa tech ecosystem and most of these startups use Twitter to attract investment.

Digital marketers and online influencers have also complained bitterly about the harsh effects of the Twitter ban on their businesses. Potential digital marketer, Favour, was on the micro-blogging platform, Twitter, pleading that tweeps follow her so that she can be a part of the campaign. Like so many others on the platform looking to become a part of this industry, some clients require that marketers have a certain number of tweeps before they would be qualify for the job.

A few days after several retweets, pleas and mentions were gathered to gather the number, the Nigerian government issued a statement on June 1.

Jide (2021) posits that “I would be lying if I said it has not affected business. Ongoing campaigns got canceled, some were put on hold and even intending campaigns got canceled just like that. For someone like me, for example, where Twitter is my main strength, it has been tough.” His outcry is not exaggerated. For vendors, it is a harsh reality they are still trying to grapple with. Another social media vendor has been completely left jobless.

There is also the internet security threat that many Nigerians are exposing themselves to by turning to the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). Not only does the widespread use of VPNs to access Twitter come at a significant cost but there is an even higher price to pay for those who turn to free VPNs instead of fee-based ones that are more

secure. The free VPNs will expose the users to data theft and various forms of hacking. Ibanga (2021)

In 2020, Nigeria overtook India as the poverty capital of the world, with about half of its population, 86.9 million people living in severe poverty. The same year, Nairametrics noted that 27.1% (about 21.7 million) Nigerians are unemployed, while the underemployment rate stands at 28.6%, leading to a total of 55.7%. It is not farfetched to state that many Nigerians will be turning to the use of free VPNs.

Furthermore, digital media has become an essential tool for information exchange with many Nigerian tweeps relying on Twitter as their emergency hotline. A few months ago, Nigerian social media users were able to raise awareness about the kidnapping and murder of a job seeker Iniubong Umoren in Akwalbom using the tools of social media. Local and international attention has also been brought to issues affecting the people relying on social media as a medium of communication and information dissemination.

For many, Twitter as well as other social media platforms has become the go to channels to obtain real-time updates and unfiltered information about events going on around the world. Ironically, even the Nigerian government relied on the use of Twitter to announce the controversial ban.

The Legality of Twitter Ban in Nigeria

The right to freedom of expression, like most other rights in Nigeria's 1999 Constitution, is not absolute. The freedom of expression provisions of the constitution contains clauses which set out when the right can be derogated or restricted.

First is the prevention of disclosure of information received in confidence, the maintenance of the authority and independence of courts, the regulation of telephony, wireless broadcasting, television or the exhibition of cinematograph films.

The second is the imposition of restrictions on the freedom of expression of public office holders at the federal or state levels, members of the armed forces or Nigeria Police Force or other government security services or agencies established by law to keep official and state secrets. The reading of the permissible grounds for limitation contains no colour or shade of authority to ban Twitter in Nigeria.

There is also the general limitation clause in section 45 of the Nigerian constitution. The section allows fundamental rights to be limited in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health. It also permits limitation of fundamental rights to protect the rights and freedom of other persons. This limitation must, however, be by “a law that is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society”. And it requires three conditions.

First is the requirement of legality – there must be a law of general application authorizing the limitation.

Second, is the requirement of proportionality. This means that the means or methods employed to limit rights must be proportionate to the objectives of the limitation.

The third is one of necessity. That is the least restrictive or invasive means or methods must be employed to achieve the objectives of limitation.

The Way Forward

It is unclear at the time of writing this how long the government plans to uphold the ban, however, with the level of difficulties faced by Nigerian youths, it is imperative that the elephant in the room is addressed on time.

Despite the Federal government's proposition on a dialogue with Twitter, this idea has not gone down well with vendors who believe that their means of livelihood is on the brink of collapse. Jide says, "Twitter is a platform with its terms and conditions. I don't think they are going to change those rules because of one country, so the intended meeting is just a waste of time."

Nduka (2020) states that "the government should lift the ban and leave it alone, any interference is weighing on our freedom of speech as citizens, which is against the democracy we practice in Nigeria."

Today, we are discussing the Twitter Ban, as the Minister of Information has threatened, it could be another social media application tomorrow. If indeed the country is an entity where "they can have business", then, unless those at the helm of affairs see it as a tool that has created job opportunities, and a tool for expressing differing political views and opinions for the betterment of the country, we might make no headway with the dialogue.

Our leaders need to understand the importance of new age applications and have passionate young Nigerians play active roles in leadership. That way, there is a balance of experience and knowledge.

The damaging effect of the ban on the economy is not one to be swept under the rug. It is now a matter of urgency.

Conclusion

There is certain inevitability about the online space. This was observed in how Nigeria's information ministry used Twitter to announce its ban of the platform – an irony that was not lost on the world's media. So rather than adopting knee-jerk responses reflected in draconian laws, governments should recognize that these forums present a certain accessibility that citizens otherwise would not have. It enables them to express legitimate concerns and engage more directly with those who govern. Banning social media platforms deprives governments and their citizens of an important communication tool and questions the commitment of a country's leadership to transparent governance.

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