

'The fall of a dry leaf is a warning to the green ones': Exploring the Twitter ban and the impending dangers of data politics, algorithmic governance, and mass surveillance in Nigeria

by Adeola Abdulateef Elega, Abdullateef Mohammed, and Felix Oloyede

Abstract

For many years, everyday Nigerians, activists, community advocates, political enthusiasts, human rights leaders, and groups saw and used social media, especially Twitter as their safe haven and a tool that gave them the unmitigated opportunities to air their opinions on topical issues of national interest, criticize the government of the day and speak truth to power — until 4 June 2021 when the Nigerian government suspended Twitter after the social media giant deleted a controversial tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari. That event is the thrust for this study as we believe that this newly realized understanding of the power of restrictive Internet policies could be a conduit for other technologically enhanced political and corrupt bureaucratic and, questionable practices such as the use of big data spying tools, digitally inclined electoral manipulation, and mass surveillance tools. As a result, we argue that the Twitter ban could be the beginning of digital authoritarianism in Nigeria. We explore the impending dangers of a dictatorial digital toolkit such as social media data mining and computational politics in social engineering with examples to buttress from patterns of foreign regimes.

Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
 - [2. The Twitter ban: The beginning of digital authoritarianism in Nigeria?](#)
 - [3. Politics of datasets: Social media data mining and social engineering in the age of big data](#)
 - [4. Algorithmic governance and audiencing](#)
 - [5. Mass surveillance and big-data spying tools](#)
 - [6. Consequences of data politics, algorithmic governance, mass surveillance in Nigeria](#)
 - [7. Conclusion](#)
 - [8. Recommendations](#)
-

1. Introduction

'The fall of a dry leaf is a warning to the green ones' is an African proverb that is more or less a wake-up call suggesting the imminent occurrence of an event, issue, or actions. In an African context, this could mean but is not limited to, when you see or hear of a death, that should remind you of your own mortality. In this case, we are proverbially and literally calling on Nigerians to be awakened by the Twitter ban as it may be the first step in data politics and the use of dictatorial digital toolkits.

The intervention of Twitter, networked technologies, and other online public spheres imbued faith in the Nigerian people that the democratization of voices stimulated by these platforms could help reduce or completely erase many of the inadequacies of Nigeria's young democracy because, unlike traditional mediated platforms, networked technologies offer numerous opportunities. One opportunity is the ability for lateral communication among users, significantly reducing the logistics of physical communities organizing, as well as advocacy and access to information. This propensity of Nigerian Twitter space has given rise to hundreds of activists, community advocates, political enthusiasts, and human rights leaders as well as powerful social movements such as #endsars and #bringbackourgirls (Oloyede and Elega, 2019) recognized around the world by other good faith nationalistic communities, empaths, tech-savvy people, and data-rich incumbents.

The Nigerian Twitter has also created a safe space for individuals and collectives to have the unmitigated opportunity to air their opinions on topical issues of national interest, criticize the government of the day (Abdullateef, 2021), and speak truth to power. This was the nature of the Nigerian Twitter until 4 June 2021 when the Nigerian government suspended Twitter "for the persistent use of the platform for the activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence". This ban occurred after the social media giant deleted a controversial tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari. The tweet, "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" was believed to threaten secessionists in Nigeria's southeast region.

In the now-deleted tweet, many believed that President Muhammadu Buhari seems to have drawn a connection between the highly contentious Nigerian Civil War [1] and attacks on Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) offices [2], many of which were in the southeast. Southeast Nigeria declared itself officially the Republic of Biafra in 1967. Although opinions on the tweet differ, a good many people believed that the tweet was divisive and served as a threat to the Igbos who are the majority in the southeast.

Despite Twitter's ability to stimulate lateral communication among citizens and potentially enhancing practices of collective governance, Twitter is neither linear nor un-linear. The same technology that gives voice to the voiceless can be controlled by the government. It favors data-rich incumbents, providing a possibility of harvesting data for political means, influencing practices of governance. According to Tufekci (2014), "These counter-trends arise specifically from an increased exploitation on big data, that is, very large datasets of information gleaned from online footprints and other sources, along with analytic and computational tools" [3].

This understanding and issues in and around the Twitter ban is the motivation for this study. While we believe that big data and good faith computational politics could indeed be leveraged to revolutionize the Nigerian political landscape as simplistically and innocently alluded to by Omoniyi and Ejalonibu (2015), a critical analysis of recent trends demonstrates that this newly realized understanding of the power of technology by the Nigerian government could be a conduit for other technologically enhanced political and corrupt bureaucratic practices. As a result, the purpose of this paper is to explain, explore, predict, and

forewarn the inevitability of big data politics, social media politics, and mass surveillance in the Nigerian political sphere. To develop this argument, first, we argue that the infamous 2021 Twitter ban could be the beginning of digital authoritarianism in Nigeria. To support this argument, we aim to provide a historical context on long-standing efforts by government to enact laws tightening regulations on social media use. There have been recent efforts by the current administration to adopt the Chinese Internet model to manage dissidents and the use of foreign social media sites; curb unfavorable alternative journalism as well as revoke Internet access as punishment for citizen revolt and activism. Additionally, there has been a crackdown on the use of VPNs to bypass the social media ban. Second, we explore the use of big data-enhanced public-opinion management systems and tools for political exploitation, resulting in a kind of engineering of the consent of people. Third, we aim to explore the new hunger by governments and rich incumbents for large amounts of personal user data for the development of artificial intelligence algorithms. These tools have been used to dissipate government criticism and promote disinformation via curated feeds. Fourthly, we aim to provide a modern historical insight into growing concerns over mass surveillance and the use of digital spying tools that ultimately disregard human rights. We provide examples from various efforts that contribute to today's surveillance order and its environment. Fifth, we aim to discuss the consequences of social media data mining, mass surveillance, and data politics if Nigeria emulates China and adopts a similar Internet filtering system. Finally, we will provide recommendations to policy-makers and stakeholders in Nigeria and elsewhere.

2. The Twitter ban: The beginning of digital authoritarianism in Nigeria?

Digital authoritarianism — the use of Internet technology by dictatorial systems and/or democratic regimes with autocratic tendencies to monitor, exploit, suppress, and control individuals and collectives — alters the distribution of power between dictatorial regimes and democratic governments. Leading this phenomenon, Russia (Poupin, 2021) and China have designed sophisticated digital information technology playbooks for authoritarian rule, creating dictatorial digital toolkits, as aptly described by Hellmeier (2016). The Chinese government's experience in utilizing unique technology-assisted digital tools for national mass surveillance and implementation of restrictive Internet policies has made it one of the best Internet filtering systems in the world. Russia's Web-based digital disinformation tools have proven to be successful in suppressing domestic and foreign opposition (Polyakova and Meserole, 2019).

China's experiences with repressive digital tool dates as far back as 2003 with the "Great Firewall," bureaucratic technological tools designed to censor and monitor Chinese Internet users. "More recently, Beijing's long experience building a robust digital surveillance architecture has started to pay dividends: China has increasingly become the supplier of choice for illiberal regimes looking to deploy surveillance systems of their own" [4]. China has exported different kinds of surveillance tools to over 30 countries. A discovery in June 2021 by the Nigerian Foundation for Investigative Journalism — that the Nigerian government "reached out to the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) to discuss plans to build an Internet firewall" — is deeply concerning [5].

While it is a known fact that the Nigerian government hasn't necessarily ever been comfortable with the use of social media platforms in Nigeria, the recent ban informed by the temporary suspension of President Buhari's account marks the latest attempt to emulate autocratic regimes in developing Internet censorship in Nigeria. The Buhari-led administration claimed that Twitter's deletion of the president's tweet was a factor. However, a prior series of events where social media was used to spread fake news and misinformation ultimately led to the ban in Nigeria. While Nigeria's concerns over social media date back to anti-social media bills proposed as far back as 2015 [6], attempts to restrict Internet freedom at all levels accelerated during the #EndSARS movement [7]. As a result of the #EndSARS protest, Minister of Information and Culture, Layiwola "Lai" Mohammed testified before the Committee on Information and National Orientation in the lower chamber of Nigeria's bicameral National Assembly to questions related to the role of social media-facilitated fake news during the #EndSARS protest. He argued that the Nigerian

government needed to censor social networking platforms. In his words, “If you go to China, you cannot get Google, Facebook, or Instagram and you can only use your e-mail because they have made sure that it is regulated.” He added “We need a social media policy that will regulate what should be said and posted and what should not. We also need technology and resources to dominate our social media space.” [8]

Some Internet firewalls, as in the United Arab Emirates, block access to specific Web pages or some Web sites. Others, like China’s ‘Great Firewall’, have almost complete control over access to sites, software, and applications (Bamman, *et al.*, 2012; Varol and Uluturk, 2018). If Nigeria emulates China and adopts a similar Internet filtering system, many Internet freedom defenders and human rights advocates fear that this may be a major step in undermining digital freedom in Nigeria. Kian Vesteinsson, Research Analyst for Technology and Democracy at Freedom House, suggests that the Buhari-led government has taken a wrong and dangerous turn into sabotaging Internet freedom in a country with so much potential for the Internet [9].

In a similar vein, Vesteinsson added that the #EndSARS protest demonstrated one of the many potentials of the Internet in stimulating collective governance in Nigeria. The power of social networking sites came to the fore during the protests especially when military officers opened fire on peaceful protesters in Lagos at the Lekki tollgate, killing at least a dozen citizens [10]. Protesters who were at the Lekki tollgate recorded videos to warn others about the violence. These videos became important evidence in efforts to seek justice from the government [11].

Ultimately, such impetus and display of power by citizens threaten the stability of governments like Buhari’s, which although democratically elected, thrives on autocratic and dictatorial approaches. For leaders like him in Uganda, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zambia, Mali, and Kazakhstan, who have implemented restrictive Internet policies recently, most provide excuses that they’re preventing misinformation, fake news, and hate speech.

While restrictive Internet policies are the most topical freedom concern in Nigeria today, it is not occurring in a vacuum. It is only the latest in a long line of autocratic behaviors by the Nigeria government which has caused a “climate of permanent violence” according to Reporters Without Borders [12]. Like Turkey and some other countries, Nigeria is increasingly becoming a dangerous place for journalists. It currently sits at number 115 out of 180 countries on the 2020 *World Press Freedom Index* [13]. The Twitter ban lasted a matter of months, once Twitter met the Nigerian government’s demands to establish a formal presence in Nigeria [14]. The Nigerian government has denied any use of Chinese technical expertise to monitor and control Internet use [15]. However, we argue that the Twitter ban was an initial foray in digital authoritarianism in Nigeria, a first step in the utilization of technological practices that could threaten democracy.

3. Politics of datasets: Social media data mining and social engineering in the age of big data

Over time, the infusion of politics, political systems, and propaganda into new media has redefined the digital landscape, allowing citizen engagement in governance (Shorey and Howard, 2016). In turn, these developments have affected how political leaders communicate, the ways in which campaigns are managed, and even how elections are contested (Owen, 2017). Social media has become attractive for those interested in accessing datasets describing user activities and interactions, information which can be harvested for various purposes. Tufekchi (2014), Maréchal (2016), and others have argued that the emergence of these networked technologies have given rise to practices that enable sophisticated computational modeling for persuasion and socio-political engineering. For some, the goal of social media data mining is none other than to influence decisions, sway opinions, and control narratives through inferences made about user interests and patterns of behaviors, thus, giving rise to a phenomenon entitled computational politics.

Social media users encounter abundant targeted ads on their newsfeeds as a result of their Web searches. Through data sharing policies and artificial intelligence technologies, corporations access data from social media platforms to push specific products to potential consumers. As widely known as this practice has become, some users have not realized that these strategies could be used for other purposes than encouraging the purchase of a specific brand's products. These tactics could additionally be used to tailor political messages.

In a society where there are so many interest groups and organizations, the most effective way to persuade the public is an engineering approach, utilizing a well conceived plan targeting the public on the authenticity of a given social, political, or ideological program (Bernays, 1947; Arquob, *et al.*, 2019). Succeeding at engineering public consent in the modern media landscape requires community and user modeling, identifying user political leanings, deploying influencers, and embracing political disinformation (Haq, *et al.*, 2020). User modeling involves the ability to classify users and interpret their habits through generated data about them. It largely operates on the principle of homophily, an understanding of the tendency of individuals to form communities based on the similarity of opinions. The usage of similar hashtags and specialized lingos is one way of developing online community structures (Bastos, *et al.*, 2013). Some online communities become susceptible to manipulation because of the level of curated information about them (Douglas, *et al.*, 2014). As inconspicuous as users think they are about their political affiliations, it only takes an analysis of their daily interactions with other users to identify their leanings. Social media users are not as mysterious as they imagine. Kosinci, *et al.* (2013) argued, for example, that personal traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behavior. "Facebook Likes, can be used to automatically and accurately predict a range of highly sensitive personal attributes including: sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, use of addictive substances, parental separation, age, and gender." [16] Predicting political affiliation is a necessity in engineering political consent as it enables strategists to not only assign a political class label based on partisan inclinations of users (Haq, *et al.*, 2020) but also aid them in accurately directing political campaigns to more receptive audiences.

The concept of Influencers is not new to media discourse. Opinion leadership in media studies can be traced to classical studies on two-step information flow by Paul Lazarsfeld, Elihu Katz, and others [17]. Essentially, mass media messages rely on more privileged media users known as 'opinion leaders' to infiltrate and influence other users with messages in order to change attitudes and behaviors. Despite a decentralization of information as a result of technologies, Choi (2015) found that this opinion leadership model still had explanatory power in forums like Twitter, as 'opinion leaders' now function as 'influencers' of opinion. These influencers are key to efficient marketing and opinion engineering because they most probably affect the behavior of specific members of online communities (Haq, *et al.*, 2020). A Nigerian example is the Buhari Media Centre (BMC), a network of local social media influencers believed to be serving the propaganda needs of the Nigerian president on social media (Oladapo and Ojebode, 2021; Hitchen, *et al.*, 2019). Adebulu (2020) noted that BMC had evolved into an "entire propaganda and mind-management industry that employs thousands of people to flood online comments with pro-regime propaganda, smear and libel government critics, invent slanderous falsehoods against critics, magnify the slip-ups of critics and use that as a crutch to deflect focus on the government's unending fraud" [18].

These circumstances demonstrate just how much power can be wielded by governments to further information asymmetry. This information asymmetry creates an authoritarian reality where political powers manipulate datasets to alter opinion.

4. Algorithmic governance and audiencing

Algorithms have become an integral part of our daily lives. We are still attempting to understand their effects on society (Woolley, 2016; Marčetić and Nolin, 2017; van Es, *et al.*, 2021). Algorithms actually

have become nearly indispensable in our data-saturated world, from social media feeds and customized search engine recommendations to airport flight schedules, credit checks, financial trading decisions (Gillespie, 2014), traffic control (Wijermars and Makhortykh, 2022), and medical interventions (Masso, *et al.*, 2022). As a potent instrument to boost government efficiency and effectiveness, algorithms in public governance have been promoted (O'Reilly, 2011; Margetts and Dunleavy, 2013). It has been argued that algorithm-driven technologies have the potential to improve economic productivity, facilitate social interaction, and even solve pressing social issues, such as reducing carbon emissions and preventing physical checks on goods crossing the borders (Botton, 2018). Recent examples — such as voting bots, fake news, and “citizen scoring” systems — have sparked debate over unintended consequences (Pasquale, 2015; Yeung, 2018). Increasing interest in the potential role of technologies has been spurred by recent developments in algorithmic governance and its implications for public life (Danaher, *et al.*, 2017). Despite the lack of a standard definition, most authors place algorithmic governance at the junction of digitalization, datafication, and technology-based governance.

The inevitability of algorithmic governance has become evident relative to one narrative: governments have become more authoritative, invasive, and omnipresent (Katzenbach and Ulbricht, 2019) as well as “increasingly being used to nudge, bias, guide, provoke, control, manipulate and constrain human behavior” [19]. For instance; the use of automated decision-making by algorithmic systems routinely favors people and collectives that are already privileged while discriminating against marginalized people or interfering with their exchange of ideas, known as ‘algorithmic audiencing’ (Riemer and Peter, 2021). These interferences not only distort the distribution of messages between individuals and groups but also suppress communication in erratic and anonymized ways.

As Riemer and Peter (2021) note, discussions in and around this form of message distortion have been entirely under the radar in a long-standing free speech debate. They note that “... algorithmic audiencing interferes with all speech on social media” [20].

Consequently, algorithmic governance has stimulated larger societal concerns such as harmful content, misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, incitement of violence, fake news as well as a manipulation of citizens based on divisive narratives, political polarization, and a creation of echo chambers. Although proper sensitization and awareness towards algorithmic governance might be a part of solving the broader problems of computational politics, public awareness of the merits and dangers needs to be a starting point in cultivating and preserving civic participation and public discourse.

5. Mass surveillance and big-data spying tools

In 2013, Edward Snowden, an American former consultant for the National Security Agency (NSA) disclosed the existence of powerful systems for domestic surveillance (Isin and Ruppert, 2017). According to revelations in Snowden’s leaked documents, the American security agency gained access to user accounts as well as data across seven digital/social media platforms. The leak also revealed the existence of another program called XKeyScore, capable of monitoring individual computer screens, browser history, phone calls, text messages, social networking site feeds and activities, Web surfing history, search inquiries on search engines, reading, and Web browsing tracking.

Snowden’s revelations also uncovered Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ) involvement in mass surveillance practices. The British intelligence agency monitored Facebook feeds and entries, phone calls, e-mail messages, Web browser histories, and other Internet data which they shared with the National Security Agency. According to the leak, intelligence agencies in Spain, Sweden, Germany, and France operated in a similar fashion.

Since Snowden’s leak, a debate over state secrecy, mass surveillance, and the balance between data privacy

and national security has more recently been at the heart of discussions about Internet communication (Anderson, 2022; Bauman, *et al.*, 2014; Lyon, 2014). According to Aradau and Blanke (2015), "President Obama argued that the NSA programme was not gathering data but metadata, namely how long a call was or where it was made from" [21]. President Obama actually noted that: "Nobody is listening to your telephone calls. That's not what this program is about" (Pearson, 2013). Metadata does not convey information about what people exactly say or actually do in their homes. The Chinese government has been able to justify and defend its use of CCTV cameras to identify and track individuals in real-time as well as track smartphones to determine user locations, and identify individuals through speech recognition tools (Lamensch, 2021).

It is not particularly surprising that world leaders defend their national security programs. Most Nigerian political actors would most likely do the same. One obvious fact is that prior lack of attention to big data's role in limiting democratic liberties, redefining privacy, and transforming the function of information in contemporary life has eclipsed efforts in data protection. Big data is lauded rather than thoroughly assessed. Kerr and Earle (2013) distinguished between consequential (helping users choose what is likely to benefit them), preferential (marketers predicting our preferences from browsing history), and preemptive (reducing individual options intentionally) prediction in big data applications. Privacy and due process are issues in law and justice. For those who cannot engage in or comprehend the legal processes, changes are necessary. The Snowden revelations created an opportunity to confront mass spying and big data in a systematic way. This phenomenon is better understood as a confluence of many streams rather than a rigid set of surveillance interactions. Incorporating surveillance into big data discussions brings into question generally claimed political and epistemologically erroneous practices.

According to Tufekci (2014), the present surveillance order and its environment can be likened to Jeremy Bentham's "panopticon" as described by Foucault (1977) in explaining surveillance. While the foundational aspect of the analogy is still similar, data politics operates in an opposite manner to the classic definition of the panopticon: "The panopticon operates by making very visible the act and possibility of observation while hiding actual instances of observation so that a prisoner never knows if she is being watched but is always aware that she could be" (Tufekci, 2014). Contemporary social engineering works differently. It basically makes "surveillance as implicit, hidden and invisible as possible, without an observed person being aware of it" (Tufekci, 2014). This new order is deeply concerning given its potential to capsize time-honored privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties policies.

6. Consequences of data politics, algorithmic governance, mass surveillance in Nigeria

While it is true that the intervention of networked technologies has given us the impetus to reimagine a democratization of voices, speaking truth to power, and challenging the status quo, we have argued that the consequences of speaking truth to power have not completely avoided the shackles of governmental apparatuses. In the case of Nigeria, an outright but temporary ban of Twitter and a consideration of technological tools to monitor the Internet have demonstrated potential problems for the future.

This analysis has pointed out possible consequences of digital authoritarianism in Nigeria, including targeted messaging, suffocation of lateral communication and public discourse, and computational propaganda.

Evidence from Cambridge Analytica's scandal demonstrated the use of personal data to aid recent U.S. political campaigns. Political messages continue to be targeted toward individuals based on their affiliations with certain groups or positions on certain issues. The use of such tools in Nigeria could be quite alarming (Gangadharan, 2012), given that Nigerian politics have been and continue to be deeply divided along tribal and religious lines. Modeling is also capable of aggregating personal attributes of voters (Kosinski, *et al.*, 2013). This sort of modeling in Nigeria could be incredibly dangerous, depending on its was actually used

to target certain individuals.

According to Tufekci (2014), by way of fear, the combination of demographic and psychographic data could also be used to engineer the consent of voters. When voters are afraid, they tend to vote for conservative candidates and support their issues (Azarian, 2016). Although political parties aren't particularly ideologically oriented in Nigeria, politicians with certain temperaments or from certain parts of the country are known to be conservatives. Hence, with the help of computational tools, scare tactics could be designed specifically to match certain individual worries and vulnerabilities. For example, targeted messages could reinforce long-standing issues, such as violence in the southwest, separatist actions in the Niger delta, economic concerns, kidnapping, and political corruption. According to Richterich (2018):

A main anxiety that is instilled in voters and politicians alike is that even efforts aimed at deconstructing political messages could be largely futile: because such messages are tailored to *e.g.*, their fears or interests; and because voters' very chances for encountering certain kinds of content may be tilted. [22]

Following Tufekci (2014), another likely consequence of the adoption of these digital toolkits would be an undermining of free thought and speak truth to power as a civic responsibility. These developments would be contrary to Habermas (1989) and an ideal public sphere. According to Tufekci (2014), recent practices have stimulated an "anti-Habermasian public sphere in which every interaction happens between people who are known quantities. The public is constituted unequally; the campaign knows a great deal about every individual while ordinary members of the public lack access to this information".

Where there is a constant effort for notions of lateral information and equal deliberation to be removed, this environment creates political homophily and a more echo chamber-like structure of communication, in turn allowing computational propaganda to thrive. This manipulation has occurred in Latin America (Forelle, *et al.*, 2015) and could be dangerous in states like Nigeria. The affordances of big data and data politics could serve as an instrument for manipulation over unsuspecting members of the public, in turn stimulating fake news (Farhall, *et al.*, 2019), hate speech, violent extremism, misinformation and reduce trust in Nigerian democratic processes.

7. Conclusion


This paper sought to make a contribution to the continuous rise of digital authoritarianism and the technodystopian expansionism by exploring the brief Nigerian Twitter ban as a initial step in the largest economy in Africa. We identified efforts made by Nigeria to embrace China's repressive Internet model.

The basic arguments in this essay were elaborated by a discussion about the dangers of data politics, algorithmic governance, and mass surveillance in Nigeria.

8. Recommendations

Nigeria faces tremendous socio-political, economic, and security challenges and, cannot afford the consequences of data politics without vividly failing as a state. Although Nigeria may seem far away from a massive use of digital tools to spread propaganda, mine social media data, and initiate mass surveillance, these practices are already in use in other nations. Researchers, civil society organizations, the judiciary,

African Union (AU), and other concerned individuals and collectives should begin a critical discussion about data politics in Nigeria and Africa at large. These debates will not only deepen our understanding of the dangers of big data and other emergent computational tools as they apply to the Nigerian case but they would also play a vital role in ensuring that:

- policies communicating Nigeria's social media regulations and computational privacy laws do not infringe on international human rights laws;
- the protection of personal data is a top priority for data-rich incumbents, states, and other stakeholders;
- civil societies invest time, money, and energy in sensitizing Nigerian people about privacy laws and personal data;
- stakeholders invest in high-tech tools and resources capable of neutralizing state surveillance and facial recognition tools;
- companies guarantee that user data will not be used or shared in ways that were not explicitly authorized by users; and,
- good faith hackers are empowered and dissident activities are encouraged to continue, in order to uphold longstanding tenets of democracy in Nigeria. 

About the authors

Adeola Abdulateef Elegba is a lecturer in mass communication at Nile University of Nigeria.
ORCID ID: 0000-0001-5635-6231
E-mail: elegaadeola [at] gmail [dot] com

Abdullateef Mohammed is a lecturer in mass communication at Nile University of Nigeria.
ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1874-0704
E-mail: talk2mohammedabdul1 [at] gmail [dot] com

Felix Oloyede is a financial journalist.
E-mail: oloyedefelixx [at] gmail [dot] com

Notes

1. The Nigerian Civil War was fought between 6 July 1967 and 15 January 1970 by the government of Nigeria and the Republic of Biafra, a secessionist state which voluntarily withdrew itself and declared its independence from Nigeria.
2. Although there had been at least 42 cases of attacks on election commission's offices nationwide, since the last general election. Assailants attacked INEC facilities across seven states in 2021.
3. Tufekci, 2014, p. [3].
4. Polyakova and Meserole, 2019, p. 2.
5. "EXCLUSIVE: Presidency meets with China's cyber regulator to build Nigerian Internet firewall" (6 June 2021), at <https://fij.ng/article/exclusive-presidency-meets-with-chinas-cyber-regulator-to-build-nigerian-internet-firewall/>, accessed 1 April 2023.
6. "The 'anti social media' bill" (15 December 2015), at <https://guardian.ng/opinion/the-anti-social-media-bill/>, accessed 1 April 2023.
7. In 2020, about six months before the Twitter ban, Nigeria witnessed a historic series of Twitter-inspired

nationwide protests by youth against police extortion, assault, and extra-judicial killings which led to the scrapping of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a notorious Nigerian police unit, in what is now popularly known as the #Endsars protest. With over 48 million tweets in the first 10 days of the protests, Twitter amplified protesta challenging the status quo in major ways. For many observers, there was a direct correlation between the #Endsars protest and the Twitter ban in Nigeria. It was clear that the government was desperate to strip young people of a tool that had become their most powerful weapon.

8. Finbarr Toesland, 2021. "Is a China-style 'Great Firewall' coming in Nigeria?" (4 October), at <https://newafricanmagazine.com/26999/>, accessed 1 April 2023.

9. Kian Vesteinsson, 2021. "Nigeria's Twitter ban is a bellwether case for Internet freedom" (24 June), at <https://www.justsecurity.org/76950/nigerias-twitter-ban-is-a-bellwether-case-for-internet-freedom/>, accessed 1 April 2023. Apart from harnessing Nigeria's fintech potential, with the help of the internet, Nigerian tech startups raised over \$US1.2 billion in 2021, one of most attractive collection of tech companies on the continent.

10. Emmanuel Akinwotu, 2021. "'The lights went out and the shooting started': #EndSars protesters find no justice one year on" (1 November), at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/nov/01/nigeria-end-sars-protesters-find-no-justice-one-year-on>, accessed 1 April 2023.

11. Ifeoluwa Adediran, 2021. "Lekki Shooting: Witness presents video evidence of people killed, injured" (8 May), at <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/south-west/460277-lekki-shooting-witness-presents-video-evidence-of-people-killed-injured.html>, accessed 1 April 2023.

12. Hillary Essien, 2022. "Nigeria under Buhari now among world's most dangerous countries for journalists: RSF" (22 January), at <https://gazettengr.com/nigeria-under-buhari-now-among-worlds-most-dangerous-countries-for-journalists-rsf/>, accessed 1 April 2023.

13. <https://rsf.org/en/2020-world-press-freedom-index-entering-decisive-decade-journalism-exacerbated-coronavirus>.

14. Tage Kene-Okafor, 2022. "Nigeria lifts ban on Twitter, says the social media giant has met conditions" (12 January), at <https://techcrunch.com/2022/01/12/nigeria-lifts-ban-on-twitter-says-the-social-media-giant-has-met-some-conditions/>, accessed 1 April 2023.

15. Robert Bociaga, 2023. "China looms large over Nigeria's presidential election" (21 February), at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/China-looms-large-over-Nigeria-s-presidential-election>, accessed 1 April 2023.

16. From the abstract of Kosinski, *et al.* (2013).

17. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Two-step_flow_of_communication, accessed 1 April 2023.

18. Adebulu, 2020, p. 1.

19. Danaher, *et al.*, 2017, p. 2.

20. Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 411.

21. Aradau and Blanke, 2015, p. 2.

22. Richterich, 2018, p. 532.

References

Mohammed Abdullateef, 2021. "Regulating social media in Nigeria: A quantitative perception study," *Nile Journal of Political Science*, volume 2, number 1, pp. 52–77, and at <https://njps.nileuniversity.edu.ng/wp-content/uploads/sites/68/2021/12/Regulating-social-media-in-Nigeria...-52-77.pdf>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Taiwo Adebulu, 2020. "Kperogi: I'm one of the reasons thousands of Buhari's media trolls were employed," at <https://www.thecable.ng/kperogi-im-one-of-the-reasons-thousands-of-buharis-media-trolls-were-employed>, accessed 8 January 2022.

Patrick D. Anderson, 2022. "On moderate and radical government whistleblowing: Edward Snowden and Julian Assange as theorists of whistleblowing ethics," *Journal of Media Ethics*, volume 37, number 1, pp. 38–52.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2021.2014847>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Claudia Aradau and Tobias Blanke. 2015. "The (Big) Data-security assemblage: Knowledge and critique," *Big Data & Society* (9 October).
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951715609066>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Omar Ahmad Abu Arqoub, Bahire Efe Özad, and Adeola Abdulateef Elegba, 2019. "The engineering of consent: A state-of-the-art review," *Public Relations Review*, volume 45, number 5, 101830.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2019.101830>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Bobby Azarian, 2016. "Fear and anxiety drive conservatives' political attitudes," *Psychology Today* (31 December), at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/mind-in-the-machine/201612/fear-and-anxiety-drive-conservatives-political-attitudes>, accessed 1 April 2022.

David Bamman, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah Smith, 2012. "Censorship and deletion practices in Chinese social media," *First Monday*, volume 17, number 3, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3943/3169>, accessed 20 September 2020.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v17i3.3943>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Marco Toledo Bastos, Cornelius Puschmann, and Rodrigo Travitzki, 2013. "Tweeting across hashtags: Overlapping users and the importance of language, topics, and politics," *HT '13: Proceedings of the 24th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media*, pp. 164–168.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2481492.2481510>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Zygmunt Bauman, Didier Bigo, Paulo Esteves, Elspeth Guild, Vivienne Jabri, David Lyon, and R.B.J. Walker, 2014. "After Snowden: Rethinking the impact of surveillance," *International Political Sociology*, volume 8, number 2, pp. 121–144.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ips.12048>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Edward L. Bernays, 1947. "The engineering of consent," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, volume 250, number 1, pp. 113–120.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/000271624725000116>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Nicolas Botton, 2018. "Blockchain and trade: Not a fix for Brexit, but could revolutionise global value chains (if governments let it)," (No. 1/2018). *European Centre for International Political Economy (ECIPE) Policy Brief*, number 1, at https://ecipe.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/ECIPE_PB0118_V3.pdf, accessed 1 April 2022.

Sujin Choi, 2015. "The two-step flow of communication in Twitter-based public forums," *Social Science Computer Review*, volume 33, number 6, pp. 696–711.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439314556599>, accessed 1 April 2022.

John Danaher, Michael J. Hogan, Chris Noone, Rónán Kennedy, Anthony Behan, Aisling De Paor, Heike

Felzmann, Muki Haklay, Su-Ming Khoo, John Morison, Maria Helen Murphy, Niall O'Brolchain, Burkhard Schafer, and Kalpana Shankar, 2017. "Algorithmic governance: Developing a research agenda through the power of collective intelligence," *Big Data & Society* (19 September). doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951717726554>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Sara Douglas, Misa Maruyama, Bryan Semaan, and Scott P. Robertson, 2014. "Politics and young adults: The effects of Facebook on candidate evaluation," *dg.o '14: Proceedings of the 15th Annual International Conference on Digital Government Research*, pp. 196–204. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1145/2612733.2612754>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Kate Farhall, Andrea Carson, Scott Wright, Andrew Gibbons, and William Lukamto, 2019. "Political elites' use of fake news discourse across communications platforms," *International Journal of Communication*, volume 13, at <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10677>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Michelle C. Forelle, Philip N. Howard, Andres Monroy-Hernandez, and Saiph Savage, 2015. "Political bots and the manipulation of public opinion in Venezuela," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, at <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:07cbc55b-f9e2-44c3-a6f9-daab377c8f8c>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Michel Foucault, 1977. *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Translated from the French by Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books.

Seeta Peña Gangadharan, 2012. "Digital inclusion and data profiling," *First Monday*, volume 17, number 5, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3821/3199>, accessed 20 September 2022. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v17i5.3821>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Tarleton Gillespie, 2014. "The relevance of algorithms," In: Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (editors). *Media technologies: Essays on communication, materiality, and society*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press. doi: <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262525374.003.0009>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Jürgen Habermas, 1989. "The public sphere," In: Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas MacKay Kellner (editors). *Critical theory and society: A reader* New York: Routledge, pp. 136–144.

Ehsan Ul Haq, Tristan Braud, Young D. Kwon, and Pan Hui, 2020. "A survey on computational politics," *IEEE Access*, volume 8, pp.197,379–197,406. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2020.3034983>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Sebastian Hellmeier, 2016. "The dictator's digital toolkit: Explaining variation in Internet filtering in authoritarian regimes," *Politics & Policy*, volume 44, number 6, pp. 1,158–1,191. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12189>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Jamie Hitchen, Jonathan Fisher, Idayat Hassan, and Nic Cheeseman, 2019. "WhatsApp and Nigeria's 2019 elections: Mobilising the people, protecting the vote," *Africa Portal* (1 July), at <https://www.africaportal.org/publications/whatsapp-and-nigerias-2019-elections-mobilising-people-protecting-vote/>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert, 2017. "Citizen Snowden," *International Journal of Communication*, volume 11, at <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5642>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Christian Katzenbach and Lena Ulbricht, 2019. "Algorithmic governance," *Internet Policy Review*, volume 8, number 4. doi: <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1424>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Ian Kerr and Jessica Earle, 2013. "Prediction, preemption, presumption: How big data threatens big picture privacy," *Stanford Law Review*, volume 66, pp. 65–72, and at <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/wp->

content/uploads/sites/3/2016/08/66_StanLRevOnline_65_KerrEarle.pdf, accessed 1 April 2023.

Michal Kosinski, David Stillwell, and Thore Graepel, 2013. "Private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behavior," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, volume 110, number 15 (11 March), pp 5,802–5,805.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1218772110>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Marie Lamensch, 2021. "Authoritarianism has been reinvented for the digital age," *Centre for International Governance Innovation* (9 July), at <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/authoritarianism-has-been-reinvented-for-the-digital-age/>, accessed 24 September 2022.

David Lyon, 2014. "Surveillance, Snowden, and big data: Capacities, consequences, critique," *Big Data & Society* (9 July).

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951714541861>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Hana Marčetić and Jan Nolin. 2017. "Feminist data studies and the emergence of a new data feminist knowledge domain," *First Monday*, volume 27, number 7, at

<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/12295/10681>, accessed 20 September 2022.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i7.12295>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Nathalie Maréchal, 2016. "When bots tweet: Toward a normative framework for bots on social networking sites," *International Journal of Communication*, volume 10, at

<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6180>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Helen Margetts and Patrick Dunleavy, 2013. "The second wave of digital-era governance: A quasi-paradigm for government on the Web," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society. A: Mathematical, Physical and Engineering Sciences*, volume 371, number 1987 (28 March), 20120382.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2012.0382>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Anu Masso, Martha Chukwu, and Stefano Calzati, 2022. "(Non)negotiable spaces of algorithmic governance: Perceptions on the Ubenwa health app as a 'relocated' solution," *New Media & Society*, volume 24, number 4, pp. 845–865.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221079027>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Oyewole Oladapo and Ayo Ojebode, 2021. "Nigeria digital rights landscape report," In: Tony Roberts (editor). *Digital rights in closing civic space: Lessons from ten African countries*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, pp. 145–166.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2021.011>, accessed 24 September 2022.

Felix Oloyede and Adeola Elega, 2019. "Exploring hashtag activism in Nigeria: A case of #Endsars campaign," In: Metin Ersoy, Nilüfer Türksöy, Bahire Efe Özad, Ülfet Kutoğlu Kuruç, Aysu Arsoy, Engin Aluç, and Can Bekcan (editors). *Think peace, talk peace, cultivate peace: [Proceedings of the] 5th International Conference in Communication and Media Studies (CRCP 2018)*. Eastern Mediterranean University Press, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, pp. 87–91, and at

<https://crep.emu.edu.tr/Documents/Books/CRCP%202018%20Proceeding%20Book%20-%20Approved%20One.pdf>, accessed 24 September 2022.

Victor Ajulor Omoniyi and Ganiyu Layi Ejalonibu, 2015. "Big data technology And leveraging open data For electoral processes In Nigeria," *Second Covenant University Conferenced on e-Governance in Nigeria (CUCEN 2015)*, at <http://eprints.covenantuniversity.edu.ng/5281/#.ZCh4ZC-B1Z0>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Tim O'Reilly, 2013. "Open data and algorithmic regulation," In: Brett Goldstein with Lauren Dyson (editors). *Beyond transparency: Open data and the future of civic innovation*. San Francisco, Calif.: Code for America Press, pp. 289–300, and at <https://beyondtransparency.org/chapters/part-5/open-data-and-algorithmic-regulation/>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Diana Owen, 2017. "The new media's role in politics," In: *The age of perplexity: Rethinking the world we knew*, at <https://www.bbvaopenmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/BBVA-OpenMind-The-age-of-perplexity-rethinking-the-world-we-knew1.pdf>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Frank Pasquale, 2015. *The black box society: The secret algorithms that control money and information*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Michael Pearson, 2013. "Obama: No one listening to your calls," *CNN* (9 June), at <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/06/07/politics/nsa-data-mining/index.html>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, 2019. "Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models," *Brookings Institution, Policy Brief, Democracy & Disorder*, at https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/FP_20190827_digital_authoritarianism_polyakova_meserole.pdf, accessed 1 April 2023.

Perrine Poupin, 2021. "Social media and state repression: The case of VKontakte and the anti-garbage protest in Shies, in Far Northern Russia," *First Monday*, volume 26, number 5, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11711/10135>, accessed 20 September 2022. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i5.11711>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Annika Richterich, 2018. "How data-driven research fuelled the Cambridge Analytica controversy," *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, volume 11, number 2, pp. 528–543, and at <http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco/article/view/19554>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Kai Riemer and Sandra Peter, 2021. "Algorithmic audiencing: Why we need to rethink free speech on social media," *Journal of Information Technology*, volume 36, number 4, pp. 409–426. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/02683962211013358>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Samantha Shorey and Philip N. Howard, 2016. "Automation, big data and politics: A research review," *International Journal of Communication*, volume 10, at <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6233>, accessed 20 September 2022.

Zeynep Tufekci, 2014. "Engineering the public: Big data, surveillance and computational politics," *First Monday*, volume 19, number 7, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4901/4097>, accessed 1 April 2023. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i7.4901>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Karin van Es, Daniel Everts, and Iris Muis, 2021. "Gendered language and employment Web sites: How search algorithms can cause allocative harm," *First Monday*, volume 26, number 8, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/11717/10200>, accessed 20 September 2022. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v26i8.11717>, accessed 1 April 2023.

Onur Varol and Ismail Uluturk, 2018. "Deception strategies and threats for online discussions," *First Monday*, volume 23, number 5, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/7883/7208>, accessed 20 September 2022. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v22i5.7883>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Mariëlle Wijermars and Mykola Makhortykh, 2022. "Sociotechnical imaginaries of algorithmic governance in EU policy on online disinformation and FinTech," *New Media & Society*, volume 24, number 4, pp. 942–963. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448221079033>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Samuel C. Woolley, 2016. "Automating power: Social bot interference in global politics," *First Monday*, volume 21, number 4, at <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/6161/5300>, accessed 20

September 2022.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v21i4.6161>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Karen Yeung, 2018. "Algorithmic regulation: A critical interrogation," *Regulation & Governance*, volume 12, number 4, pp. 505–523.

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/rego.12158>, accessed 1 April 2022.

Editorial history

Received 10 July 2022; revised 7 October 2022; accepted 13 January 2023.



This paper is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

'The fall of a dry leaf is a warning to the green ones': Exploring the Twitter ban and the impending dangers of data politics, algorithmic governance, and mass surveillance in Nigeria by Adeola Abduleef Elegu, Abdullateef Mohammed, and Felix Oloyede.

First Monday, volume 28, number 4 (April 2023).

doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i4.12692>