

DIGITAL RIGHTS AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN NIGERIA; CASE STUDY: THE TWITTER BAN (2021–2022)"

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between digital rights and internet governance in Nigeria, with particular focus on the suspension of Twitter between 2021 and 2022 within the broader period of 2015 to 2024. The study adopts a qualitative research approach, relying on documentary analysis of legal frameworks, policy documents, and relevant scholarly literature to understand how governance practices affect digital rights in practice. The findings reveal that Nigeria has made notable progress in developing legal and institutional frameworks for regulating digital space through laws such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act, as well as through the activities of key regulatory bodies. However, the study also finds that the implementation of these frameworks remains inconsistent due to institutional overlaps, weak coordination, and limited enforcement capacity. The Twitter ban demonstrates that while the state seeks to assert control over digital platforms, such actions may not fully achieve their intended outcomes and can also restrict fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression and access to information. The study concludes that effective internet governance in Nigeria requires a more balanced approach that ensures regulatory actions are aligned with the protection of digital rights. It recommends strengthening institutional coordination, improving enforcement mechanisms, and ensuring that regulatory measures are guided by clear and consistent legal processes.

Keywords: Digital rights, Internet governance, Twitter ban, Freedom of expression, Nigeria

1.0 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The proliferation of digital technologies has fundamentally restructured the architecture of political communication, economic exchange, and civic mobilization across the African continent. In Nigeria, this transformation has been particularly pronounced. Between 2015 and 2024, internet penetration expanded from approximately 40% to over 70% of the population, generating an estimated 150 million active users and positioning the country as Africa's largest digital market by volume. This expansion has not merely augmented existing modes of interaction; it has instantiated new arenas of governance contestation where state authority, corporate platform power, and citizen agency intersect in complex and often contradictory ways¹.

Internet governance in Nigeria operates through a network of institutional actors with overlapping but complementary roles. The Nigerian Communications Commission is responsible for licensing and regulating telecommunications infrastructure, while the National Information Technology Development Agency develops policies on data management and

digital standards². In addition, the National Broadcasting Commission extends regulatory oversight to online content. These institutions function within a legal framework established by laws such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 and the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, both of which affirm Nigeria's authority over digital activities within its territorial jurisdiction³.

Nigeria's approach to digital policy has evolved. Earlier policies focused mainly on expanding access and promoting market liberalization. More recent developments reflect a shift toward cyber-sovereignty, which emphasizes the state's authority to regulate digital space, including data flows, online content, and the operations of global technology platforms. However, this shift has not been entirely consistent, resulting in a mixed approach that combines democratic values with increasing state control. This tension is particularly visible in the regulation of social media platforms⁴. Platforms such as Twitter have become central to communication, political participation, and public discourse in Nigeria. At the same time, they are often viewed by the government as sources of misinformation and potential threats to national security. As a result, regulatory responses have fluctuated between encouraging digital engagement and imposing restrictive measures. The suspension of Twitter between June 2021 and January 2022 represents a significant moment in Nigeria's digital governance landscape⁵. The decision followed the deletion of a tweet by the Nigerian president, which the government interpreted as an act of bias. In response, the government imposed an indefinite suspension, citing concerns related to national security and state integrity. Legal warnings were also issued against individuals attempting to bypass the restriction through virtual private networks (VPNs) 6. Despite these measures, the effectiveness of the ban was limited. Many users continued to access the platform through alternative means, reducing the overall impact of the restriction. The suspension also had notable economic implications and attracted criticism from civil society groups, who questioned its legality and its effect on freedom of expression. The eventual resolution in January 2022 was achieved through negotiations, leading to agreements on regulatory compliance and engagement with Nigerian authorities⁶.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The suspension of Twitter in Nigeria in June 2021 represents one of the most significant government interventions in the country's digital space. The government described the action as an indefinite suspension, citing concerns about national security and the protection of Nigeria's corporate existence. However, despite this strong assertion of state authority, the ban was lifted after seven months with limited structural changes to the platform's operations. During this period, many citizens continued to access Twitter through virtual private networks (VPNs), raising questions about the effectiveness of the restriction. This situation highlights a critical gap between the state's claim of control over digital platforms and its actual capacity to enforce such contro⁷.

The Twitter ban reflects a broader pattern within Nigeria's internet governance framework between 2015 and 2024. Legal instruments such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act provide the basis for regulating digital activities. However, the implementation of these laws has often been inconsistent, with regulatory actions sometimes introduced through administrative directives rather than clearly defined legal processes. While the state frequently asserts authority over digital platforms, the outcomes of

such interventions remain uncertain and, in some cases, ineffective. This has created a governance environment in which digital rights, particularly freedom of expression and access to information, may be restricted without a corresponding level of legal clarity or institutional consistency. The absence of clear boundaries between legitimate regulation and excessive control makes it difficult for citizens and digital platforms to predict how and when regulatory power will be exercised. Existing scholarly discussions do not fully capture this pattern. Much of the literature on internet governance in Africa focuses on issues such as digital access and economic development, while studies on digital authoritarianism tend to examine states with strong and effective control over online spaces. These approaches do not adequately explain situations like Nigeria, where the state seeks to regulate digital platforms but faces limitations in enforcement and coordination. The problem, therefore, is that Nigeria's approach to internet governance reflects a tension between the desire to assert control over digital space and the practical challenges of doing so effectively, often resulting in restrictions on digital rights without achieving the intended regulatory outcomes. The Twitter ban provides a clear example of this issue, revealing broader weaknesses within Nigeria's digital governance framework that remain insufficiently examined.

2.1 Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine the relationship between digital rights and internet governance in Nigeria, with a focus on the Twitter ban (2021–2022) within the broader period of 2015 to 2024. To achieve this aim, the specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. Examine the development of internet governance mechanisms in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024.
- ii. identify the major governance challenges within Nigeria's digital regulatory framework.
- iii. assess the extent to which digital rights, particularly freedom of expression, are affected by internet governance practices in Nigeria.

2.2 Research Questions

In line with the stated objectives, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. How have internet governance mechanisms developed in Nigeria between 2015 and 2024?
- ii. What are the major governance challenges within Nigeria's digital regulatory framework?
- iii. How do internet governance practices affect digital rights, particularly freedom of expression, in Nigeria, with reference to the Twitter ban (2021–2022)?

2.3 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses the need to balance state authority with the protection of digital rights in Nigeria's growing digital space. As internet access and social media usage expand, digital platforms have become central to communication, information sharing, and public participation. This makes it important to understand how these platforms are governed and how users' rights are protected. From an academic perspective, the study

contributes to existing knowledge by examining how internet governance directly affects digital rights such as freedom of expression and access to information. By focusing on the Twitter ban as a case study, it provides a practical example of how government actions shape digital experiences in reality. From a policy perspective, the study highlights key challenges such as inconsistent implementation of laws, overlapping institutional roles, and unclear regulatory boundaries. These insights can guide policymakers and legal practitioners in developing more effective and rights-sensitive governance frameworks. The study is also significant to civil society and the general public, as it shows how government decisions in the digital space can influence participation, communication, and democratic engagement. Overall, it contributes to ongoing discussions on accountability, transparency, and the protection of digital rights in Nigeria.

3.0 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on examining digital rights and internet governance in Nigeria, with specific attention to the suspension of Twitter between 2021 and 2022. It explores how government actions in the digital space influence the protection of fundamental rights, particularly freedom of expression and access to information. The study is situated within the period 2015 to 2024, reflecting key developments in Nigeria's digital landscape. It highlights the expansion of social media, evolving regulatory frameworks, and increased state involvement in platform regulation. The Twitter ban is used as a case study to illustrate broader governance patterns. The analysis is limited to legal, policy, and institutional dimensions, excluding technical or cybersecurity aspects. Overall, the study provides a focused understanding of the interaction between state authority and digital rights in Nigeria.

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Internet Governance

Internet governance refers to the development and application of rules, principles, and institutions that guide how the internet is used and regulated. According to Pandey and Ravishankar (2022), it involves multiple stakeholders, including governments, private sector actors, and civil society, all working together to ensure that the internet remains accessible, secure, and properly managed. The concept emphasizes coordination and shared responsibility in managing digital space⁷. In Nigeria, internet governance is shaped by institutions such as the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), which are responsible for policy formulation, regulation, and enforcement of digital activities. These institutions operate within legal frameworks such as the Cybercrimes Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act. Studies have shown that Nigeria has made progress in expanding internet access and promoting digital development. However, much of the literature focuses on infrastructure and economic growth, with limited attention to how governance frameworks affect digital rights in practice. This creates a need to examine how these governance structures influence real-life digital experiences⁸.

4.2 Digital Rights and Freedom of Expression

Digital rights refer to the rights and freedoms individuals enjoy in the digital environment, including privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information. These rights are

extensions of fundamental human rights and are essential for democratic participation in modern societies. As digital platforms continue to grow, the protection of these rights has become increasingly important, freedom of expression, in particular, is widely recognized as a core digital right, as it allows individuals to share opinions, access diverse information, and participate in public discourse. In Nigeria, this right is constitutionally guaranteed; however, its application in the digital space remains inconsistent⁹. Scholars have noted that government interventions in online platforms can sometimes limit these rights, especially where there are no clear legal guidelines. This creates tension between the need to regulate digital space and the obligation to protect individual freedoms. As a result, the effectiveness of digital rights protection in Nigeria continues to be debated within existing literature¹⁰.

4.3 Regulation of Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms have become central to communication, political engagement, and information sharing in contemporary society. Platforms such as Twitter provide spaces where individuals can express opinions, engage in discussions, and hold governments accountable. These platforms have also played important roles in shaping public opinion and mobilizing civic participation, governments often perceive social media as a potential threat due to its ability to spread misinformation and influence political stability¹¹. This has led to increasing efforts to regulate these platforms. Scholars have observed that regulatory approaches vary, ranging from support for digital participation to restrictive measures aimed at controlling online content. In Nigeria, this has created an ongoing debate on how to balance the need for regulation with the protection of digital rights. The challenge lies in ensuring that regulation does not undermine the freedoms that make digital platforms valuable for democratic engagement¹².

4.4 The Twitter Ban and Digital Governance in Nigeria

The suspension of Twitter in Nigeria between 2021 and 2022 has been widely discussed as a major example of government intervention in the digital space. The decision followed the deletion of a presidential tweet, after which the government imposed an indefinite ban on the platform. This action generated significant debate both within Nigeria and internationally. Some scholars interpret the ban as an attempt by the government to assert control over digital platforms and protect national interests⁵. Others argue that it represents a restriction on digital rights, particularly freedom of expression and access to information. Despite the enforcement of the ban, many users continued to access the platform through alternative means, raising questions about the effectiveness of such regulatory actions. Existing studies have largely focused on the event itself, with limited attention given to how it reflects broader patterns in Nigeria's internet governance framework. This creates the need for a more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between governance and digital rights⁶.

5.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

5.1 Regime Theory

Regime Theory is a major concept in International Relations that explains how states cooperate through established rules, norms, and institutions in order to manage shared issues within the global system. The theory was developed by scholars such as Stephen Krasner, who defined

international regimes as sets of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue area. Other contributors, including Robert Keohane, emphasized that regimes help states cooperate even in an anarchic international system where there is no central authority¹³.

Regime Theory assumes that states are not always in conflict but can work together through agreed frameworks to address common challenges. These regimes reduce uncertainty, promote coordination, and create standards that guide behaviour across borders. In the context of digital governance, the internet is a global space that cannot be effectively managed by any single state¹⁵. As a result, governance depends on shared rules, cooperation, and alignment with international standards, in relation to internet governance, Regime Theory helps explain how global and domestic frameworks interact in shaping digital regulation. States often develop their national policies in line with international best practices, while still maintaining control over their internal digital environment. This creates a balance between cooperation and sovereignty¹⁵.

For Nigeria, Regime Theory is useful in explaining how institutions and laws guide internet governance practices. Regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) operate within both domestic frameworks and global expectations. Nigeria's digital policies are influenced by international standards, even though implementation may vary, the case of the Twitter ban illustrates the relevance of this theory². While governance structures and regulatory frameworks exist, their application may not always be consistent or effective. The ban shows that although the state seeks to regulate digital platforms within established frameworks, practical challenges can limit enforcement. Regime Theory therefore highlights the gap between formal rules and actual outcomes, particularly in situations where digital rights are affected, the theory provides a useful lens for understanding how internet governance in Nigeria is shaped by both institutional frameworks and broader global influences, while also revealing the limitations of these structures in practice¹⁵.

5.2 Cyber Realism Theory

Cyber Realism is an extension of classical Realist theory, which has its roots in the works of scholars such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. Realism argues that the international system is characterized by competition, where states act primarily to protect their national interests, security, and survival. In the digital age, these ideas have been extended into cyberspace, giving rise to Cyber Realism¹⁶.

Cyber Realism views the digital environment as a space where states seek to assert control, protect sovereignty, and minimize external influence. Unlike perspectives that see the internet as open and cooperative, Cyber Realism emphasizes power, authority, and strategic interests. According to scholars such as Ikuero (2024), states approach cyberspace with the same priorities they apply in traditional international relations, focusing on control, security, and national interest¹⁷.

This theory is particularly relevant in understanding government actions toward digital platforms. States may adopt regulatory or restrictive measures not only to maintain order but also to assert authority over digital space. Such actions are often driven by concerns about

national security, political stability, and the influence of foreign actors. In Nigeria, Cyber Realism helps explain the government's decision to suspend Twitter in 2021. The ban can be interpreted as an attempt by the state to assert control over digital communication and protect perceived national interests. It reflects the idea that states seek to maintain authority within their digital borders, especially when they perceive threats to their sovereignty¹⁷

The outcome of the ban also highlights the limitations of this approach. Despite the government's efforts, many users continued to access the platform through alternative means, showing that state control in cyberspace is not always absolute. This demonstrates that while states aim to dominate digital space, their capacity to fully enforce such control remains constrained¹⁸. Cyber Realism therefore provides a useful framework for understanding both the motivations behind government actions and the practical challenges involved in regulating digital platforms. It shows that internet governance is not only about rules and cooperation but also about power, control, and the continuous struggle to maintain authority in an increasingly interconnected digital world¹⁸.

6.0 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the relationship between digital rights and internet governance in Nigeria, with a focus on the suspension of Twitter between 2021 and 2022. The qualitative approach is suitable as it enables an in-depth analysis of legal frameworks, policy decisions, and governance practices within their real-life context. The study relies primarily on secondary data, including relevant legislation such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act, as well as government policy documents, official statements, and reports relating to the Twitter ban². In addition, scholarly articles, books, and reports from reputable organizations were used to provide theoretical and empirical support. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involves identifying and organizing recurring themes within the collected materials. Key themes examined include digital rights protection, government regulation, institutional roles, and freedom of expression. This approach allows for a systematic interpretation of both legal texts and policy actions¹⁹. The study further adopts a case-focused approach, using the Twitter ban as a practical illustration of government intervention in the digital space. This provides a concrete basis for assessing how internet governance frameworks shape digital rights in Nigeria¹⁸.

7.0 RESULTS

The findings of this study reveal that internet governance in Nigeria is characterized by a combination of regulatory efforts, institutional involvement, and practical limitations in implementation. The first key finding is that Nigeria has established a number of legal and institutional frameworks aimed at regulating digital space. Laws such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act provide a formal basis for managing online activities. Similarly, regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) play important roles in shaping policy and enforcing regulations. These developments indicate that Nigeria has made progress in structuring its internet governance system. However, the study finds that the implementation of these frameworks remains

inconsistent. Regulatory actions are not always guided by clearly defined procedures, and there is evidence of overlapping responsibilities among institutions. This has resulted in a governance environment where policies are sometimes applied unevenly, creating uncertainty for both users and digital platforms. The lack of clear coordination among regulatory bodies further limits the effectiveness of governance efforts.

Another important finding relates to the impact of government actions on digital rights. The study shows that while digital rights such as freedom of expression are formally recognized, they are not always fully protected in practice. Government interventions in the digital space can sometimes restrict these rights, particularly when such actions are taken without clear legal justification. This creates a situation where the protection of rights depends largely on how governance frameworks are applied in specific cases.

The suspension of Twitter between 2021 and 2022 provides a clear example of these challenges. The ban was introduced as a measure to address concerns related to national security and state authority. However, the findings indicate that the enforcement of the ban was only partially effective, as many users continued to access the platform through alternative means such as virtual private networks (VPNs). This highlights a gap between the intention of regulatory actions and their actual outcomes. In addition, the study finds that the Twitter ban had significant implications for digital rights, particularly freedom of expression and access to information. The restriction limited the ability of individuals to communicate, share ideas, and participate in public discourse. At the same time, the eventual lifting of the ban following negotiations suggests that government authority in the digital space is not absolute and may be influenced by external and internal pressures. Overall, the findings indicate that Nigeria's internet governance framework reflects a tension between the desire to assert control over digital platforms and the practical challenges of enforcing such control. While legal frameworks and institutions exist, their effectiveness is shaped by issues of coordination, implementation, and capacity. This results in a governance system where digital rights may be restricted without fully achieving the intended regulatory objectives.

8.0 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study show that internet governance in Nigeria is shaped by existing legal frameworks and institutional arrangements, but their effectiveness remains limited in practice. This observation is consistent with the views of scholars such as Jovan Kurbalija, who argues that effective internet governance depends on strong institutional capacity and coordination. While Nigeria has established key regulatory bodies such as the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), the findings of this study indicate that coordination challenges and inconsistent implementation continue to affect governance outcomes²⁰.

The study also confirms existing scholarly arguments that digital rights, particularly freedom of expression, are often vulnerable in the context of state regulation. Previous studies have emphasized that although digital rights are constitutionally recognized, their protection in practice depends on how governance frameworks are applied. The findings of this research support this position, showing that government interventions can restrict digital rights, especially when such actions are not guided by clear legal procedures²⁰. In relation to the

regulation of social media platforms, the findings align with existing literature which suggests that governments often adopt mixed approaches, balancing between control and openness. Scholars have noted that while platforms such as Twitter promote civic engagement and public discourse, they are also perceived as potential threats due to misinformation and political influence. The findings of this study reflect this dual perspective, showing that Nigeria's approach to platform regulation is characterized by both regulatory intent and restrictive measures²¹.

Furthermore, the study contributes to ongoing debates on state control in the digital space. While some scholars argue that states are increasingly asserting authority over digital platforms, the findings of this study reveal that such control is not always fully effective. The Twitter ban provides a clear example of this limitation. Although the government sought to regulate the platform, many users continued to access it through alternative means, demonstrating that enforcement capacity does not always match regulatory intentions²². The findings also extend existing literature by highlighting the gap between regulatory actions and their outcomes. While previous studies have discussed government interventions in general terms, this research provides a more practical understanding of how such actions affect digital rights in real-life situations. It shows that internet governance in Nigeria is not only shaped by laws and policies but also by practical constraints such as institutional capacity and user behaviour²³.

9.0 CONCLUSION

This study examined digital rights and internet governance in Nigeria, with particular attention to the suspension of Twitter between 2021 and 2022 within the broader period of 2015 to 2024. The findings indicate that Nigeria has made notable progress in developing legal and institutional frameworks to regulate its digital space through laws such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act and the Nigeria Data Protection Act, as well as through the activities of regulatory bodies like the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA). These developments reflect the country's effort to manage its digital environment and assert regulatory control over online platforms. However, the study also shows that implementation remains inconsistent due to institutional overlaps, weak coordination, and limited enforcement capacity. The Twitter ban further demonstrates that while the state seeks to regulate digital platforms, such actions may not always achieve the intended outcomes and can also lead to restrictions on fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and access to information.

To build on the findings of this study and consolidate the progress made, it is recommended that Nigeria:

- i. strengthens institutional coordination by clearly defining the roles of regulatory bodies involved in internet governance;
- ii. ensure that regulatory actions affecting digital platforms are guided by clear legal procedures to avoid arbitrary restrictions on digital rights;
- iii. promote a more balanced approach to governance that protects freedom of expression while addressing legitimate security concerns;

- iv. improve enforcement capacity by investing in digital infrastructure and regulatory mechanisms;
- v. enhance engagement with digital platform providers to ensure compliance while maintaining users' rights.

ENDNOTES

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