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### Article

# Communication Rights on Hold? An Examination of the Seven-Month Ban on Twitter (X) in Nigeria

**Abstract:** *This article examines the seven-month ban of Twitter (now known as X) imposed by the Nigerian government in June 2021. Conceptualising the microblogging platform as a digital public sphere useful for national, regional and local conversations in Nigeria, the article discusses, among other things, how Twitter (X) was used by Nigerian youth in mobilising resistance to police brutality and misconduct in Nigeria in the year preceding the ban. Drawing on this to emphasise the broader significance of the social media platform in enabling citizens to exercise their communication rights, the article highlights the implications of the ban for communication rights, political participation, and democratic citizenship.*

**Keywords:** *Communication rights; Twitter (X); Political Participation; Digital Public Sphere; Nigerian Youth*

## 1. Introduction

In today's contemporary world, available literature (for example, Suherlan, 2023; Theocharis et al., 2023; Waeterloos, 2025; Contri et al., 2025) highlights the continued relevance of internet access and connectivity, social media platforms, and evolving digitalisation in

promoting political participation and active democratic citizenship. As information and communications technologies (ICTs) continue to penetrate and gain ground across regions in Africa, the enhanced responsiveness, social presence of interaction, and new discursive spaces they provide are transforming civic and political participation (Uwalaka and Watkins, 2018; Olaniyan and Akpojivi, 2021; Chari and Akpojivi, 2023).

Nigeria is no exception, as advancements in ICTs continue to transform communicative ecologies in the country such that various subaltern groups and previously passive audiences are able to access alternative news stories via social media and participate in national, regional and local conversations (Mutsvairo, 2016;

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Egbunike, 2021; Akingbade, 2023). Beyond daily social and cultural engagements online, youths in Nigeria and elsewhere on the continent, who are mostly apathetic and disengaged from the political process in their countries, have leveraged the affordances of social media for democratic self-expression and political participation (Ndlela, 2020; Malila and Pela, 2020; Akingbade, 2023; Tsandzana, 2024).

However, few studies examine the dynamics and complex trajectories shaping how people across African countries use the internet and social media for civic and political participation and as an expression of their communication rights<sup>1</sup>. This article seeks to contribute to filling this gap in the literature by analysing the Nigerian government's seven-month ban of the microblogging platform, Twitter, now rebranded as X. Drawing on theoretical perspectives on digital public sphere and counterpublics as a framework, this paper discusses how Twitter (X) was used by Nigerian youth in mobilising resistance to police brutality and misconduct in Nigeria, highlighting through this case the broader significance of the social media platform in enabling citizens to exercise their communication rights. It further considers the implications of the ban for communication rights, political participation, and democratic citizenship in the country. As evidenced in relevant studies (for example, Sinpeng, 2021; Mohammed and Ferraris, 2021), Twitter (X) in this article is approached as useful in creating a digital public sphere for national, regional, and local conversations. In Nigeria, it remains one of the main social media platforms where citizens, especially the youth, access alternative news and exercise their communication rights and democratic citizenship.

## **2. Understanding the Context of the Seven-Month Twitter (X) Ban in Nigeria**

On 5 June 2021, Twitter (X) was banned in Nigeria. This was officially disclosed by the country's Ministry of Information and Culture in an announcement that the operations of the social media platform have been 'suspended indefinitely'. This happened at a time when netizens in the country, who are mostly youths, regularly draw on social media platforms as an integral part of their day-to-day activities. They not only socialise and get entertainment updates on this social media platform but also engage with news, access alternative news sources about politics and governance and share and publicise their views and opinions (Anyim, 2021; Dambo et al., 2022; Akingbade, 2021, 2023).

The Twitter (X) ban happened against the background of several years of citizens' growing distrust of Nigeria's political class and the mainstream media. Over the years, there have been criticisms that the mainstream media has neglected its crucial role of producing in-depth investigative, advocacy, and adversarial journalism, which was common during the rule of military regimes (Dare, 2007, 2011; Olaniyan and Akpojivi, 2021). While mainstream media was well known and regarded – prior to military regimes and during the agitations against colonial rule – as a major source of political education, it is now accused of being complicit in the corrupt practices of the political class (Kperogi, 2012; Akinola et al., 2022).

The palpable distrust of Nigeria's political class and the mainstream media continues to engender the use of Twitter (X) and other social media platforms for democratic self-expression, dialogue and agitation for social change, and political participation. This is evidenced in studies that have highlighted netizens' continual use of social media to engage with the Nigerian polity and call out mainstream media and political officeholders to prioritise specific issues of

national concern. A clear instance that speaks to this is the use of Twitter (X) in the year 2020 by Nigerian youths, including those abroad, to mobilise themselves and convene on the streets in protest against police brutality and the excesses of the state's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) – a now disbanded tactical unit of the Nigerian police, notorious for its extortion and cruelty against youths suspected of crime (Akingbade, 2023). This is further unpacked as a case study in this article.

Although the Nigerian authorities justified the Twitter (X) ban saying it was needed to curtail “the persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence”, this was widely condemned across the country and its vast diaspora, especially by netizens, local and international civil society organisations, the governments of the United States of America and other key western democratic countries (Blankenship and Golubski, 2021; Obadare, 2022; Princewill and Busari, 2021). A content analysis of 3885 social media posts made between 5 June and 16 July 2021 by netizens in reaction to the ban shows that over 70% of these posts condemned the Twitter (X) ban (Mohammed and Adelakun, 2023). Several stakeholders across local and international civil society organisations have argued that the ban was the government's systematic way of censoring and restricting citizens' freedom of expression, access to information, and communication rights which are crucial pillars of democracy (Obadare, 2022).

Two days before the ban, the microblogging site deleted a tweet/post from the official Twitter (X) handle of the then democratically elected president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, after many Nigerian netizens flagged it as offensive and threatening. In the controversial tweet, the then-president, referencing Nigeria's civil war 1967 – 1970, threatened to deal with agitators from southeast Nigeria, whom he alleged were responsible for several attacks on public infrastructure in the region, while also stating that they would be treated “in the language they will understand” (Princewill and Busari, 2021).

While Twitter's management stated that the deleted tweet had indeed violated its policy on abusive and offensive messaging and behaviour, the then Nigerian Minister of Information and Culture accused the social media platform of double standards. It would seem that the minister was deflecting as he did not logically unpack his assertion. This is considering the Nigerian government's double standards evident in how the government affirms that every Nigerian has a right to democratic self-expression, access to ICTs and the affordances it provides while also boldly justifying the ban of Twitter (X).

The disposition of the government and Nigeria's political class is also evident in past attempts to enforce stringent regulatory measures regarding citizens' use of social media platforms. An example is a proposed bill, sponsored in 2013 by one of the senators in Nigeria's upper legislative chamber, which sought to criminalise political messaging through social media that was deemed abusive and critical of the state and government officials (Akpojivi, 2018). Although the bill was not passed into law, similar bills have been considered by the Nigerian senate: the ‘National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill 2019’ seeks to control social media communication and proposes the death penalty for anyone found guilty of propagating hate speech (Olaniyan and Akpojivi, 2021; Akingbade, 2023). Even though the threat of a death sentence proposed as a penalty for those found guilty has been dropped following a massive outcry of public displeasure and criticism, sponsors and supporters of the bill, which has not yet been passed into law, insist it is in Nigeria's best interest (Akpojivi, 2018). This, alongside the continuous clamour for similar vague hate speech bills, indicates a

loss of perspective by the political class on how communication rights via social media serve democracy (Akingbade, 2023).

Undemocratic actions that curtail citizens' rights to freedom of expression, access to information, and communication through the internet and social media are not unique to Nigeria; similar occurrences have been documented to varying extents in other African nations as well as across both the developing and developed world (Ayalew, 2019; Freyburg and Garbe, 2018; Tsandzana, 2024; Ngangum, 2024). Exemplified in the restrictive and censorship practices of authoritarian regimes in China and Russia and protracted internet shutdowns in Cameroon and Chad, this is against the backdrop of global discursive assertions about internet access as a fundamental right for every citizen and its importance in fostering communication capabilities (Musiani et al., 2009; Melanson, 2010; Oyedemi, 2015; Kravets, 2011; Chari and Akpojivi, 2023). Governments of different nations are expected to use their authorities and powers to facilitate the provision of affordable access to ICTs and social media platforms for all citizens rather than stifling the exchange of ideas, political participation and democratic citizenship, which are key affordances this access offers.

### **3. Twitter (X) as a Digital Public Sphere: Theoretical Perspectives**

Arguably, the concept of the public sphere has over time remained a valuable and central framework for understanding media and communication processes in the political arena. This stems from Habermas' seminal work, where the public sphere has been theorised as a realm of social life in which private individuals come together to form public opinion on matters of public concern (Habermas, 1974). The theorising brings to the fore the philosophical concept and consciousness of different demographics of "publics" and their importance in mediating between society and the state authority by holding the latter accountable to the former (Crossley and Roberts, 2004). The theorising also foregrounds the public use of rational, informed discussion as a form of political participation and confrontation, whereby participants set aside their differences in birth or fortune to communicate with one another as peers (Habermas, 1989; Fraser, 1990). Unlike state power and market economies prone to domination and reification, this provided a valuable framework for understanding the public sphere as a democratic mode of societal coordination, communication, and unfettered debate (Fraser, 1990; Calhoun, 1996).

However, the popularity of non-print forms of mass media has over time led to individualised media consumption whereby the type and quality of media have implications for individuals' agency and public participation as citizens (Mare, 2016). This is characterised by citizens' unequal access to and control over the public sphere which operated by appearance only as mediated political communication carried out by an elite, specifically journalists and other public actors – whose appearance in journalism constructed them as opinion leaders (Garham, 2007; Bruns and Highfield, 2016). With ordinary citizens cast as passive audience members who merely observe events as they unfold on "the virtual stage of mediated communication", this vertical, top-down model has, over the years, continued to inhibit citizens' political participation (Bruns and Highfield, 2016, p. 99). This is responsible for various layers of complexities that continue to inhibit an ideal communicative environment where a plurality of opinions, communication rights, and active political participation would be accommodated and upheld. This explains the usefulness of relatively recent scholarship on counterpublics

that has paid significant attention to the potential of ICTs and social media in supporting and sustaining multiple digital public spheres (Jackson and Welles, 2015; Choi and Cho, 2017; Jackson and Kreiss, 2023). This attention is understandable considering the capacity of social media platforms to reconfigure communicative power relations such that citizens are able to challenge the monopoly on media production and dissemination by state and commercial institutions (Shirky, 2011; Fenton, 2012; Casero-Ripollés, 2020).

Relevant conceptualisations on counterpublics assert that social media platforms aid democracy, as they increase the number of spaces available for deliberation and dissent and legitimise collective experiences of maltreatment, expropriation, marginalisation and human rights violation (Fenton, 2012; Choi and Cho, 2017). This is made possible because social media platforms do not require a unified message to challenge mainstream discourses and have fast become one of the notable mediated spaces where marginalised voices can deliberate collectively with the potential to impact wider publics (Wasserman, 2011; Shirky, 2011; Jackson and Welles, 2015). This has engendered a participatory digital media culture where professional journalists and experienced gatekeepers in traditional media are forced to coexist, sometimes cooperating or conflicting with netizens who leverage the affordances of social media platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, etc. in emerging as actors capable of producing and disseminating information (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). This is evidenced in studies (for example Malila and Pela, 2020; Akingbade, 2023; Mohammed and Ferraris, 2021) which highlight how different categories of a previously passive audience in Nigeria and elsewhere in the developing world have in recent times drawn on ICTs and social media to ensure their opinions and voices are not excluded from the public sphere. In line with this, this article draws on conceptualisations of counterpublics where citizens' rights to freely communicate and deliberate using social media as a digital public sphere have been emphasised.

#### **4. Twitter (X) and the #EndSARS Campaign in Nigeria**

As previously stated, the place of Twitter (X) as a digital public sphere for citizens' dialogue and democratic self-expression is evidenced in how the 2020 #EndSARS campaign morphed from online activism on the platform into street protests. The protests happened simultaneously across several cities in Nigeria's six geopolitical zones and grounded activities for days. Championed by Nigerian youth, with support from those abroad, the protests against persistent police brutality and the excesses of the state's Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) caught the attention of civil society organisations and the international community in no time, putting the Nigerian government under pressure. Even though SARS was created mainly to fight serious crimes, the squad became notorious for profiling youths, harassing, maltreating and extorting them with impunity (Akerele-Popoola et al., 2022). The #EndSARS protesters, made up of Nigerian youths from different social classes, religions and ethnic groups, went beyond their demand for the SARS squad to be disbanded to also insisting on the prosecution of poor police conduct and an evaluation and retraining of police officers.

The theorisation of counterpublics as a space where collective experiences of maltreatment and violation of human rights are legitimised is exemplified in how Twitter (X) was used as a digital public sphere where the #EndSARS conversation and activism started by Nigerian youths sharing their sad experiences of how they suffered harassment, extortion and other human rights violations from the police and SARS. The social media platform gave them a 'safe



space' where they could exercise their communication rights and express their dissatisfaction and frustration, exemplifying how Twitter (X) goes beyond being just a platform where Nigeria's youths and other netizens only socialise and get entertained to avoid boredom. Before the online activism morphed into street protests and during and after the protests, different forms of social media engagement were commonplace – from uploading photos and videos of live reportage from different protest locations to millions of tweets and numerous retweets using the hashtag #EndSARS. This is useful in further highlighting how social media can be a valuable digital public sphere where netizens can legitimise their feelings and experiences, mobilise themselves and build momentum that can metamorphose into street protests across several cities and get the attention and support of international figures and organisations. During the protests, Twitter (X) was also used in mobilising and raising funds useful for providing protesters with legal representation, feeding, anti-tear gas spray and other needed resources.

Several reports indicate that before the #EndSARS campaign, the Nigerian government had been largely indifferent to the plight of the youths and failed to prioritise their concerns with regard to the inhumane treatment many of them have received from the police and SARS. However, these youths were able to leverage the reconfiguration of communicative ecologies that social media engenders, enabling them to become key actors capable of producing and disseminating information through which they can speak truth to power. This is in line with relevant studies (for example Hari, 2014; Ibezim-Ohaeri, 2017; Kperogi, 2020; Palmieri-Branco, 2021). These studies acknowledge the gradual emergence of a new political culture across several regions and countries due to citizens' continuous demand for responsible governance and public accountability through their use of social media to exercise their communication rights and champion pertinent issues ignored by political officeholders.

The #EndSARS protests ended abruptly due to different factors, especially the government's undemocratic decision to forcefully silence the unarmed protesters by dispersing them through the use of riot control agents and firearms at a toll gate in Lekki, Lagos State, Nigeria. However, these remain the largest movement for social change in Nigeria by the youths and bring to the fore social media use as a digital public sphere where communication rights are exercised

## **5. Implications of the seven-month Twitter (X) ban**

The importance of citizens' right to communicate in any democratic state cannot be overemphasised, especially in developing states like Nigeria. It lies at the core of deliberative modern democracy as it affords citizens the right to participate in the democratic process, express themselves and shape public polity (Habermas, 2006). This crucial role in the advancement of democracy becomes inhibited when a social media platform whose affordances citizens leverage to exercise their communication rights is banned. This is especially worrisome in countries like Nigeria where the government is intolerant and always ready to silence peaceful protesters forcefully. The undemocratic act of intolerance of peaceful protests by Nigeria's political officeholders is evidenced in rallies organised in 2012 against the soaring increase in fuel prices (#OccupyNigeria) and the earlier discussed #EndSARS campaign which led to the loss of lives and many injuries (Loomis, 2012; Obiezu, 2021). Nigeria's democratisation efforts are being eroded when citizens are not only scared to take to the streets to communicate their grievances to their democratically elected officials out of fear for their safety but are also unable to access

the ‘safe space’ where they exercise their communication rights. This sad reality is against the backdrop of high expectations that the third wave of democratisation which commenced in 1999 after many years of military rule would uphold citizens’ communication rights. This is considering the history of human rights abuses, censorship and government control of the communication sphere that characterised the era of military rule.

#OccupyNigeria, earlier mentioned, and the #BringBackOurGirls are other instances where social media has been used to exercise citizens’ communication rights and push for social change. Nigerian youth, as the core group of netizens leveraging social media for political participation and to exercise their communication rights, are increasingly questioning the value of democracy in Nigeria. This skepticism, alongside other reasons such as the acute lack of democratic dividends, stems from the state’s persistent efforts to stifle their ability to communicate and participate in discourses on the digital public sphere rather than safeguard their fundamental rights to democratic self-expression (Uzoezie, 2021; Akingbade, 2021, 2023). The disempowerment that comes from this in a country that is largely gerontocratic fuels youths’ frustration and diminishes their support for democracy (Cheeseman, 2022).

Despite the youths’ frustrations, the government often conveniently cites the rise of click-bait, hoaxes, fake news, and conspiracy theories as a ready excuse and justification for its continuous attempts to restrict communication rights exercised through social media. While these are legitimate concerns considering the epidemic of misinformation in today’s world, these must be delicately balanced with an in-depth understanding that citizens’ human and communication rights must be upheld. The actions of the state indicate that the need for this delicate balance is not understood. The government is expected to remain committed to combating fake news, hate speech and the like; however, this must not be used as a fig leaf to systematically curtail citizens’ freedom of speech and communication rights.

## 6. Conclusions

Drawing on theoretical perspectives on the digital public sphere and counterpublics as a framework, this paper has examined the ban on Twitter (X) by the Nigerian government and highlighted what this means for citizens’ communication rights. Banning a social media platform that citizens find useful for democratic self-expression is inconsistent with the tenets of the country’s 1999 constitution, the African charter on human and peoples’ rights, and international human rights obligations which affirm individual rights to freely seek, receive, express, disseminate information and participate in public discourses. As earlier outlined, this Twitter (X) ban, coupled with the continuous efforts by political officeholders to sponsor vague hate speech bills, indicates a loss of perspective on how communication rights via social media serve democracy.

This does not strengthen democracy in Nigeria as it disempowers and frustrates youths who, in large numbers, creatively leverage social media for consistent and sustained advocacy and participation in public discourses. The frustration is also exacerbated by the economic implications of the seven-month ban which according to the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry cost the country a loss of over 26 billion United States dollars in potential revenue (Kedem, 2022). Youths who work within the digital economy and have business operations on Twitter (X) lost out on revenues as a result of the ban. Although some who had the means and technical know-how were able to acquire virtual private networks while others switched their

business models to other social media platforms (Obadare, 2022), the different layers of frustration that characterise the ban cannot be downplayed.

Nigeria is one of the countries with the world's largest youth population, with about 70% of citizens under 30 (Akinyemi, 2023). Apart from Twitter (X) and other social media platforms being an integral part of the day-to-day activities for this large category of citizens, many of them who are vocal, politically active and alive to their civic responsibilities use Twitter (X). An indefinite suspension of Twitter (X) despite its usefulness in enhancing freedom of speech and communication contributes to an erosion of democratic values and ideals and has the propensity to fuel apathy and disengagement with regard to youths' political participation and democratic citizenship. This is in consonance with the survey indicating that youths in Nigeria are less likely to support democracy than older citizens (Cheeseman, 2022).

Democracy in developing states like Nigeria cannot be effectively nurtured to maturation if political officeholders and others at the helm of affairs at all levels of governance fail to understand that communication rights are not being advocated for just because they are good in and of themselves. Rather, they are being advocated for because they serve a major purpose in advancing democracy. The core principles that underlie citizens' rights to free and democratic participation must be respected by political officeholders. It is important that advocacy efforts are intensified by civil society, activists and other stakeholders who work to advance democratic tenets in the developing world. This must be geared towards ensuring that the delicate balance between combating fake news and upholding citizens' communication rights is not tipped by political officeholders in favour of digital authoritarianism where netizens are unable to leverage social media to speak truth to power and demand accountable governance.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## **About the author**

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## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> Communication rights have over time remained a broad and expanding concept with different definitions and applications across various countries and regions. This article, however, draws on the conceptualisation of communication rights as citizens' ability to freely seek, receive, express, impart information and participate in public and societal discourses (Corredoira, 2021; Akpojivi, 2024)



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