The conversation on Social Media regulation should change to one of building Trust

On 12th April 2021, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey tweeted that the company would be setting up its first Africa office in Accra, Ghana[i]. Among reasons for selecting Ghana are its being 'a champion of democracy' and 'a supporter of free speech, online freedom, and the Open Internet', which Twitter also advocates[ii]. Unsurprisingly, Nigerian Twitter users responded with varying reactions to this news[iii]. Reactions likely connected to Jack's visit to the country in 2019, which may have fuelled hopes that Nigeria would be home to the company's first Africa office[iv]. While some Nigerians lamented the difficult business climate as reason for Twitter's decision, the Minister of Information and Culture instead attributed this to efforts by the Nigerian media to 'de-market' the country[v].

One might think this a curious remark but given similar sentiments expressed by the Minister after the #EndSARS protests last October, it is not altogether strange. More so, the Minister had then mentioned the need to 'regulate social media' which he claimed exacerbated the protests through the spread of 'fake news'[vi]. This also comes on the back of the proposed 'Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations' bill[vii] being deliberated by the Senate. Considering the existing trust deficit[viii] between Government and Nigerian citizens however, we must carefully interrogate the morality of the Minister's position and by extension the bill.

Attempts by governments the world over to regulate social media are hardly novel. In 2017, Germany passed its 'Network Enforcement Act' which dictates how social media companies must handle unlawful content posted on their platforms[ix]. Closer home on the continent, Tanzania's 2020 Electronic and Postal Communications (Online Content) Act identifies prohibited content to include false, untrue, or misleading material[x]. At first glance, the Nigerian government also seems to aim for similar objectives. Still, elements of the bill – such as disabling user access to the Internet and social media[xi] – signal that a further breakdown of citizen trust is imminent.

During the Ebola outbreak in 2014, Twitter served as an early warning system alerting the public, including this author, about Nigeria's first case ahead of official statements by public health authorities. According to analysts, 101 tweets generated by regular citizens reached close to 1.2 million people, a figure that exploded to almost 60 million in two days[xii]. In fact, social media including Twitter, are credited to have contributed to Nigeria's success in containing the Ebola virus and correcting wrong information around purported treatments for the virus[xiii].

Similarly, citizens have been able to drive advocacy efforts via social media as COVID-19 rages. Through these efforts, health workers have received improved hazard allowances from the government, and relevant authorities were able to promptly implement disciplinary measures against lockdown violations reported via these platforms[xiv]. The Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) also leverages social media to provide daily updates on infections and fatalities, and preventative tips to combat the

virus[xv]. It is quite evident that social media can drive social causes[xvi] and play a role in diffusing information widely and quickly.

Conversely, this characteristic of social media also means it provides the space for disinformation and misinformation merchants to peddle their craft and thrive. There have been accounts of disinformation deepening existing ethno-religious differences and intensifying insecurity in already fragile parts of the country[xvii]. Interestingly, these acts are not limited to regular citizens alone as political actors have also been noted to be actively involved[xviii]. Indeed, when considered through the government's lens, it would seem justifiable to withhold access to platforms which may aggravate life-threatening or delicate situations.

Nonetheless, the alleged use of disinformation tactics during the 2019 elections which brought the present government to power, may cast a pall on its social media regulation agenda and create allowances for mistrust to persist[xix]. An instance of this mistrust was especially manifest during the #EndSARS protests when news broke on social media that relief materials meant for vulnerable groups during the state-imposed COVID-19 lockdown, were supposedly hoarded for months. Expectedly, there were widespread cases of citizens breaking into locations where these items were stored[xx]. It may be argued that citizens would have remained in the dark regarding the materials were it not for the awareness created through social media. If the government enacts a law that denies 'online' access at will on the one hand, but fails to uphold 'offline' social contracts with citizens on the other, might it not be said that the government cannot be trusted?

Trust in government is further threatened by the economic impacts of Internet or social media shutdowns. Using indicators from the World Bank and the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), NetBlocks estimates the costs of shutting down social media services for one day in Nigeria, to be about $30 million[xxi]. For a nation keen to diversify its economy and which acknowledges how information and communication technologies can create employment opportunities and transform the economy[xxii], encouraging legislation that enforces the disruption of social media and Internet access seems counterintuitive. Surely, the government can appreciate how paradoxical this is.

Rather than pass this bill into law, the government should reimagine ways to rebuild citizen trust using the same platforms. This is where the Ministry of Information and Culture[xxiii] can be instrumental in improving relations between the government and Nigerian citizens through dynamic, proactive, and transparent communication. Furthermore, by working with the National Orientation Agency and digital rights organisations, digital literacy programs that reorient citizen attitudes towards the appropriate use of social media should be implemented. In this way, both citizens and the government would be equipped with necessary skills to use social media responsibly, spot disinformation or misinformation and become advocates for safe online behaviour.

As noted in some studies conducted within the context of fledgling democracies[xxiv], social media can enable the Nigerian government to engage transparently with citizens, improve citizen participation in politics and in the long run, possibly regain their trust. Going a step further, the government should also conclude passage of the Digital Rights and Freedom bill which seeks to among other objectives, ensure citizens can 'communicate freely without fear of undue monitoring and interference'[xxv] online.

It may be too soon to tell the scale of missed opportunities for Nigeria regarding Twitter's decision to establish its first African presence in Ghana. What is apparent though is not only does the government need to work at building citizens' trust, but it should also be seen as 'a supporter of free speech, online freedom, and the Open Internet'. A good starting point to arrive at this destination would be for the government to backtrack on the more invasive sections of the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations bill.

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Reflective Piece

Despite taking a philosophy class in my first year as an undergraduate, having a natural sciences background meant that I initially struggled with some concepts in this module. For instance, when we considered the dilemmas presented in the driverless car scenario, I wondered what problem driverless cars really aim to solve. It seemed straightforward to me that if a human driver were faced with the same dilemmas, whatever decision (s)he made in that split second would be morally 'wrong' from at least one perspective. How or why were these dilemmas any different for driverless cars? Perhaps, the problem for which driverless cars were conceived needs to be redefined if the same kinds of fatality risks still exist.

In writing this op-ed, I was concerned about how best I might incorporate the module concepts in a topic relevant to my context and interests. I was also keen to address this topic differently and more broadly than my educational background would typically have allowed me to. Hence, I settled on a topic that relates to social media because its use in Nigeria has grown steadily in the last five years and there is evidence showing its impact in the country. This also meant that regardless of its technology basis, it was important for me to develop my op-ed through societal and economic lenses rather than focusing on technical aspects only. Consequently, in researching evidence for the op-ed, I tended to select papers which reflected these lenses and were authored by Nigerians or researchers from countries with similar political climates as ours. I also specifically mentioned Twitter in the op-ed because it is my preferred social media platform to use, and it is reported as being effective for trending or topical issues[1]; for instance, I first heard of the 2014 Ebola disease breakout in Lagos on Twitter. It is also reportedly the platform on which Nigerians spend upwards of 10 hours on daily[2]. In addition, the reasons Twitter gives for choosing Ghana as its first African location are almost antithetical to some elements of the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations bill. Moreover, I referred to the #EndSARS incident in the op-ed to present a situation where the Nigerian government might claim a legitimate basis to pass the bill into law given the widespread riots that trailed the protests.

A central element factored in the op-ed is the long-standing mistrust between the Nigerian government and its citizens, and how that would translate to online engagements. While I understand that it is not entirely possible to decipher the government's true intentions behind its actions whether through policies or regulations, the impact on its people of whom I am a part, create opportunities for mistrust. However, it was also important for me to recognise the government's concerns with the spill over effects of disinformation or misinformation propagated through social media, on communities facing insecurity. This presented a possible moral question; on the one hand, social media democratises information dissemination so restricting access may be viewed as trampling on citizens' rights. On the other hand, this action might be justifiable in situations where disinformation generated on social media could lead to disorder in society and in some cases even, armed conflict. In addressing this issue, I tried to employ the ethical cycle to frame the

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problem, identify and analyse stakeholder interests, and then consider the options available to me. My acknowledging this challenge is why I recommended that the Ministry of Information and Culture leverage these platforms to re-establish trust between government and citizens, regardless of my not agreeing with the sentiments expressed by the Minister. As the agency charged with cultivating positive values nationwide, the National Orientation Agency is also recommended to work with the Ministry in this regard. I chose not to recommend direct engagement between the government and social media companies regarding digital literacy initiatives because I believe that digital rights organisations are better equipped to manage this dynamic. Perhaps, capacity may be acquired in the long-term within government agencies to enable them to conduct these interactions directly. Furthermore, the Digital Rights and Freedom bill currently being deliberated by the Nigerian House of Representatives was initiated through the lobbying efforts of a digital rights organisation. Expectedly, I also suggested a quick passage of this bill into law because it may likely signal that the government can be trusted to not deny citizens' their right to access digital platforms.

Although my professional experience in the last seven years has been at the Central Bank of Nigeria which is charged with stabilising the economy through setting monetary policies, I chose not to write this op-ed through a purely economic lens. This is because I believe that a more fundamental problem to address is ensuring citizens' digital rights are protected. Notwithstanding the recent explosion of financial technology solutions which have lowered certain barriers for a lot of young Nigerians, and impacted the economy, what should be prioritised now is enabling existing and new users of digital platforms access as needed. The COVID-19 pandemic glaringly exposed the digital divide in the country as students without access to the Internet had their learning interrupted. I imagine that for even the digitally included ones, if the government decides to restrict Internet access the same effect would be felt albeit likely at a reduced scale. Additionally, small business operators tend to rely on the reach and visibility that social media platforms provide to serve their customers. While there has been an attempt to compute the economic costs of Internet shutdowns and by extension social media, I am uncertain how representative these figures are. However, realising that these small business owners could be derived of income is concerning enough especially in a country where the informal sector comprises an estimated 65%[3] of the economy. If I were to revisit this op-ed later, I would likely elaborate the economic angle.

Another angle I would consider exploring is the extent that citizens' mistrust in government may have contributed to their perception of the severity of COVID-19 compared to the general reception of the 2014 Ebola outbreak. This is because the current government is from a different political party than the elected government in 2014. Additionally, citizens' reactions to COVID-19 in public and on social media range from outright denial of the virus to it being a pretext for the government to fraudulently obtain funds from international donor organisations[4].

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