

The Impact of Social Media Information in Checkmating Social Injustice and Bad Governance in Nigeria

Oyinlade Morenike Busayo ¹, Asoh-chika Favour Onyinyechii ², Owoeye Dayo Victor ³

^{1 2 3}Directorate of General Studies, College of Health Sciences and Technology Ijero-Ekiti, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a powerful platform for civic engagement in Nigeria, providing citizens with tools to challenge injustice, expose corruption, and hold leaders accountable. This paper examines the impact of social media information in addressing social injustice and poor governance in Nigeria, drawing on case studies such as the #EndSARS protests and the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. While these movements demonstrate the transformative potential of digital platforms, the study also highlights the risks posed by misinformation and disinformation, which undermine credibility and polarise civic discourse. Using the lenses of Technological Determinism and Uses and Gratifications theory, this paper examines how Nigerians adopt social media, both as a tool for empowerment and as a channel vulnerable to manipulation. The findings emphasise that social media operates as a double-edged sword: enabling grassroots mobilisation while amplifying false narratives. The paper recommends stronger digital literacy programs, robust fact-checking mechanisms, and inclusive rural engagement to maximise the democratic potential of social media while minimising its threats.

Keywords: Social Media, Information, Social Injustice, Bad Governance, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of social media has transformed the way Nigerians engage with political authorities and challenge systemic injustice. Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have become alternative public spheres where citizens share information, mobilise collective action, and amplify the voices of those traditionally marginalised in mainstream media. Movements such as #EndSARS and #BringBackOurGirls illustrate how digital networks can galvanise nationwide protests, draw international attention, and pressure state institutions to act. Social media has therefore emerged as a critical instrument for accountability in Nigeria's fragile democracy. The youth, who constitute over 60% of Nigeria's population, have increasingly turned to social media to voice their frustrations and demand accountability from their leaders. The disenchantment of this demographic with the political system is fueled by a lack of basic infrastructure, high unemployment rates, and systemic corruption, which are often discussed and amplified through social media channels.

At the same time, however, these platforms are not without challenges. Alongside their potential for civic empowerment lies the rapid spread of misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, which often distort public debates and erode trust in governance. From false reports during elections to conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines, misinformation campaigns have revealed the vulnerability of citizens to manipulation by political actors, opportunistic influencers, and even external groups. The tension between empowerment and distortion raises urgent questions about the role of social media in Nigeria's socio-political landscape.

This paper seeks to interrogate the dual impact of social media on Nigerian society by addressing the following guiding questions:

1. How does social media information empower civic action against injustice and bad governance in Nigeria?
2. What mechanisms facilitate the spread of misinformation, and who are the key actors involved?

3. How do urban and rural populations differ in their use of social media, given the persistent digital divide?

By exploring these questions, the paper positions social media as a double-edged sword in Nigerian governance. The analysis is framed by Technological Determinism, which emphasises the transformative power of technology, and Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains why Nigerians actively adopt these platforms for civic engagement. In doing so, the paper highlights both the emancipatory and the disruptive dimensions of social media in shaping Nigeria's democratic future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media

Carr and Hayes state that social media consists of internet-based channels that enable users to interact opportunistically and selectively present themselves to both broad and narrow audiences, deriving value from user-generated content and perceived interactions with others. Their concept was developed to provide a separate space for researchers to conduct future studies on the communication aspects of social media. Although the most frequent description emphasises the technology underpinning social media, including the internet and user-generated content, it also explains why consumers utilise social media. Social networking programs are accessible on every device, including smartphones, tablets, laptops, and computers. The functions include, among other things, a) chatting, b) virtual relationships such as friends, followers, or connections, and c) tweeting. Some users are always linked to their virtual selves, devoting the majority of their time to face-to-face relationships.

Social Media and Political Engagement

Social media has transformed political communication globally by offering citizens low-cost, real-time tools for mobilisation and advocacy. In Nigeria, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have enabled young people to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and challenge entrenched authority structures. The #EndSARS protests of 2020 demonstrate how digital activism can rapidly mobilise collective action, compelling government institutions to respond to popular demands (Tayo & Olowojolu, 2021). Similarly, the #BringBackOurGirls movement demonstrated how online activism can generate international solidarity and pressure the state into accountability (Okunade & Olayode, 2021). These cases confirm Castells' (2012) view that networked communication provides new opportunities for political agency in societies marked by weak democratic institutions.

Social Media, Accountability, and Civic Participation

Beyond protest movements, social media also functions as an accountability tool. Scholars argue that platforms have created alternative spaces where citizens can expose corruption, demand transparency, and challenge official narratives (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). In Nigeria, investigative journalists and civil society groups use Twitter hashtags and Facebook pages to amplify evidence of misgovernance, often compelling responses from state actors. However, civic participation remains uneven due to disparities in digital literacy and infrastructure, which affect how rural and urban populations engage online (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2019). This underscores the importance of analyzing not only the empowering aspects of social media but also the digital divide that shapes access to these tools. This engagement is vital in a democratic society, as it fosters accountability and transparency in governance.

Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News Dynamics

While social media enables civic activism, it also facilitates the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. Fake news in Nigeria often spreads through WhatsApp closed groups, political propaganda networks, and influencer accounts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, conspiracy theories about vaccines circulated widely on social media, undermining public health efforts (Olatunji et al., 2021). Political misinformation has also shaped election cycles, with false stories about ballot fraud or candidate scandals going viral during the 2019 elections (Adeniran, 2020). These patterns reflect Allcott and Gentzkow's (2017)

argument that fake news thrives in polarised environments where information verification is weak. Importantly, such disinformation campaigns are not random but often orchestrated by political actors, opportunistic media entrepreneurs, and ideological influencers.

Regulation, Governance, and Free Speech

The regulatory challenges of social media in Nigeria are multifaceted, reflecting both the state's desire to maintain order and citizens' demand for democratic freedoms. The federal government has, at various times, adopted restrictive measures that expose the fragility of Nigeria's digital governance framework. The most notable was the 2021 suspension of Twitter, which was imposed after the platform removed a controversial tweet by the president. The government justified the ban on grounds of national security and public order, but critics widely interpreted it as an attempt to silence dissent and suppress citizen mobilisation (Olorunnisola, 2022). This episode highlighted how regulation in Nigeria often oscillates between legitimate concerns over harmful content and political efforts to control the digital public sphere. In 2022, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) introduced a draft Code of Practice for Interactive Computer Service Platforms, which mandates platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp to register locally, establish local offices, and comply with takedown requests for "prohibited content." While framed as a strategy to combat misinformation and cybercrime, civil society organisations argued that the policy risks undermining free speech and civic participation (Onuoha, 2022). Concerns centre on vague definitions of harmful content, the lack of judicial oversight for takedown requests, and the potential for selective enforcement against critics of government policies.

Comparative insights help contextualise Nigeria's regulatory efforts. In Europe, the Digital Services Act (DSA) requires platforms to remove illegal content swiftly while ensuring transparency, accountability, and appeal mechanisms for users (European Commission, 2022). Similarly, Germany's NetzDG law obliges platforms to delete hate speech within 24 hours, but it has been criticised for overblocking and incentivising censorship by private companies (Keller, 2019). These examples illustrate the global tension between ensuring online safety and safeguarding democratic freedoms. Unlike the EU, however, Nigeria's regulatory proposals lack strong transparency and accountability provisions, raising concerns about potential authoritarian overreach. Scholars argue that weak institutions and limited media literacy further complicate regulation in Nigeria, unlike advanced democracies, where independent regulators and strong civil society oversight balance state power. Nigeria's regulatory landscape often reflects partisan interests (Ojo, 2021). Moreover, the persistence of digital divides means that regulatory interventions disproportionately affect urban, digitally connected populations, while rural communities remain excluded mainly from both risks and protections. This asymmetry raises critical questions about whose voices are amplified or silenced by regulatory practices.

Therefore, the Nigerian case illustrates a broader paradox: while governments must address the dangers of misinformation, hate speech, and cybercrime, regulation that prioritises control over accountability risks undermining the very democratic values it seeks to protect. The challenge, then, lies in crafting balanced, transparent, and participatory frameworks that both protect citizens from harm and preserve the vibrancy of Nigeria's digital public sphere.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand the dual role of social media as both a tool for empowerment and a channel for misinformation in Nigeria, this study is anchored on two complementary theories, Technological Determinism and Uses and Gratifications, which together provide a robust lens for analysing how digital platforms shape, and are shaped by, user practices in the socio-political sphere.

Technological Determinism

The theory of Technological Determinism, most prominently advanced by McLuhan (1964) and further developed by Postman (1993), posits that technological innovations shape human communication, social interactions, and cultural structures. In this perspective, technology is not neutral; it actively determines how people think, organise, and interact. Applied to the Nigerian context, social media platforms such as Twitter,

Facebook, and WhatsApp have redefined political communication by enabling rapid information dissemination and collective mobilisation. For instance, during the **#EndSARS protests of 2020**, Twitter was not simply a communication tool but the very infrastructure through which protest logistics, narratives, and solidarity were

built (Tayo & Olowojolu, 2021). Similarly, WhatsApp has served as a primary channel for rural communities with lower internet penetration, creating new circuits of information sharing that extend beyond mainstream media (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2019). These examples illustrate how the technological affordances of platforms—such as hashtags, livestreaming, and encrypted groups—shape activism, political discourse, and even misinformation campaigns in Nigeria. In line with McLuhan's (1964) assertion that "the medium is the message," Nigerian social media activism exemplifies how platforms themselves structure civic action.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973) shifts scholarly attention from technology itself to the agency of media users. Rather than treating audiences as passive recipients of information, the theory emphasises that individuals actively seek out media content to satisfy a range of needs, including information, entertainment, social interaction, surveillance, and identity formation. This perspective offers a valuable counterbalance to technologically deterministic views, as it highlights the diverse and purposeful ways in which people adapt media technologies to their own contexts.

In Nigeria, U&G has significant explanatory power in understanding the diverse motivations behind citizens' use of social media. For urban youths, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook serve not only as sources of real-time political information but also as spaces for self-expression and collective identity formation. The **#EndSARS** protests exemplify this, as young Nigerians used hashtags to express solidarity, gain visibility, and mobilise support both locally and globally (Tayo & Olowojolu, 2021). These gratifications extend beyond information-seeking, encompassing emotional release, validation, and the construction of a generational identity that challenges older political structures. For rural populations, however, the theory illuminates different patterns. Studies show that WhatsApp groups function as localized forums for sharing political updates, community news, and religious or cultural messages (Olorunnisola & Martin, 2019). Here, gratifications are rooted in belonging, trust, and interpersonal connectivity, reflecting contexts where face-to-face networks intersect with digital platforms. However, these same motivations also make rural users more vulnerable to misinformation, as messages from trusted peers are often forwarded without verification.

Crucially, U&G also helps explain why misinformation spreads across Nigerian social media. Users do not always share content for informational accuracy; they often do so for entertainment, humour, or affirmation within a social group. As Olatunji et al. (2021) note in their study of COVID-19 infodemics in Nigeria, users frequently circulated conspiracy theories and miracle cures not necessarily because they believed them, but because forwarding them satisfied needs for engagement, humour, or belonging in WhatsApp groups. Thus, while U&G highlights the empowering aspects of user agency, it also exposes the unintended consequences of active participation, where gratifications pursued by individuals contribute to the amplification of disinformation campaigns.

Integrating the theories of Technological Determinism and Uses and Gratifications offers a complementary framework for analysing social media's role in Nigeria. While Technological Determinism underscores how platforms' affordances—such as hashtags, viral sharing, or encryption—create opportunities for activism or manipulation, Uses and Gratifications emphasises the subjective motivations of users, explaining why Nigerians turn to these platforms in the first place and how their practices sustain both civic activism and misinformation. This dual lens captures the double-edged nature of social media: it is simultaneously a structural force shaping public discourse and a user-driven space where empowerment, resistance, and manipulation intersect.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining content analysis of selected social media campaigns

with a survey of Nigerian youths. This design allows for both qualitative and quantitative insights, aligning with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) argument that integrating multiple methods enhances research validity.

Content Analysis

A purposive sample of 50 social media posts was drawn from Twitter and WhatsApp between October 2020 and December 2022. Posts included those tagged with hashtags such as #EndSARS, #BringBackOurGirls, #OccupyNigeria, and #COVID19Nigeria. The sample also included examples of viral misinformation verified by fact-checking platforms such as Dubawa and Africa Check. Posts were coded under three categories using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework.

1. Empowerment (mobilising citizens, amplifying voices, exposing injustice).
2. Misinformation (false claims, conspiracy theories, politically motivated propaganda).
3. Regulation-related discourse (citizen reactions to Twitter ban, calls for oversight).

Survey

Additionally, a survey was conducted among 150 Nigerian youths (aged 18–35) across three states: Ekiti, Lagos, and Abuja, using convenience and snowball sampling to capture both urban and semi-urban populations. The questionnaire combined closed-ended and open-ended items, focusing on primary platforms used (Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook), perceptions of social media as a tool for civic engagement, experiences with misinformation (including exposure, sharing, and verification practices), and views on government regulation and its impact on free expression. The questionnaire was designed to cover areas such:

- Primary platforms used (Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook).
- Perceptions of social media as a tool for civic engagement.
- Experiences with misinformation (exposure, sharing, verification practices).
- Views on government regulation and its impact on free expression.

Data from closed-ended questions were analyzed through descriptive statistics such as frequency counts and percentages, while qualitative responses were examined using thematic analysis. Participation in the study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained. Respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, in line with established principles of social science research ethics (Bryman, 2016).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media as a Tool for Civic Empowerment

Survey results showed that 78% of respondents (117 out of 150) considered Twitter their primary platform for political engagement, citing speed and global visibility. WhatsApp was the second most popular (72%), particularly among semi-urban respondents. Content analysis confirmed this pattern, with hashtags such as #EndSARS and #BringBackOurGirls dominating the discourse. These findings highlight the role of Technological Determinism (McLuhan, 1964): platform features such as hashtags and retweets directly structured activism. Simultaneously, Uses and Gratifications theory explains why citizens adopted these platforms to meet needs for information, solidarity, and identity (Katz et al., 1973).

Grassroots Participation and the Digital Divide

While Twitter dominated among urban users, 27% of respondents (41 out of 150), mostly from rural areas, relied primarily on WhatsApp and community channels. Poor connectivity and limited digital literacy hindered participation in Twitter-driven activism. Content analysis reinforced this: WhatsApp was saturated with chain messages and unverified claims, unlike the more public, scrutinised Twitter discourse. This confirms Olorunnisola and Martin's (2019) argument that digital inequalities shape civic participation in Africa. Urban youths dominate Twitter activism, while rural citizens often rely on WhatsApp, which can expose them to greater misinformation.

Mechanisms of Misinformation

Over 60% of respondents (90 out of 150) reported encountering false news daily, primarily through WhatsApp. Examples included fabricated election results, COVID-19 vaccine conspiracy theories, and politically motivated propaganda. Fact-checks from Dubawa and Africa Check confirmed these as orchestrated campaigns, not random misinformation. This finding supports Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), who argue that fake news thrives in polarised contexts. In Nigeria, misinformation is not just incidental it is weaponised by political actors and amplified by influencers. U&G theory also explains why some users share misinformation to reinforce group identity or for entertainment, rather than accuracy.

Regulatory Challenges

When asked about regulation, 43% of respondents (65 out of 150) supported stronger controls to curb misinformation, while 57% (85 out of 150) feared regulation would suppress free speech, citing the 2021 Twitter ban. Online discussions mirrored this divide: some saw regulation as necessary, others as censorship. This reflects global debates: Germany's NetzDG law and the EU's Digital Services Act balance regulation with rights (Keller, 2019). Nigeria's opaque regulatory practices, however, raise concerns about authoritarian overreach (Olorunnisola, 2022).

Synthesizing the findings, the expanded data reveal that social media in Nigeria serves as a double-edged sword: it both empowers citizens and facilitates manipulation and exclusion. Through the lens of Technological Determinism, we can observe how the features of these platforms shape activism. An application of Uses and Gratifications helps us understand the reasons behind Nigerians' adoption and, at times, misuse of these platforms. Together, these theories shed light on the intricate interplay between empowerment, misinformation, and governance.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of social media information in checkmating social injustice and bad governance in Nigeria, combining content analysis of online campaigns with a survey of 150 Nigerian youths across Ekiti, Lagos, and Abuja. The findings show that social media has become a critical civic tool: 78% of respondents identified Twitter as their main platform for political engagement, while 72% relied on WhatsApp for communication and mobilisation. Campaigns such as #EndSARS and #BringBackOurGirls demonstrate the transformative power of digital activism in mobilising citizens, amplifying the voices of the marginalised, and holding leaders accountable. However, the study also underscores the risks of misinformation. More than 60% of respondents reported daily exposure to false news, particularly on WhatsApp, including fabricated election results and conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 vaccine. These findings reveal that misinformation in Nigeria is not incidental but often orchestrated by political actors and amplified by influencers. Additionally, the digital divide remains significant: while urban youth dominate Twitter activism, rural participants (approximately 27% of the sample) are largely confined to WhatsApp, where misinformation is more difficult to verify.

The dual application of Technological Determinism and Uses and Gratifications theory was particularly useful in explaining these dynamics. Technological Determinism showed how platform features (hashtags, livestreaming, encrypted groups) structured activism, while Uses and Gratifications explained why users adopted platforms for information, solidarity, and belonging even at the cost of spreading falsehoods. Social media in Nigeria, therefore, functions as a double-edged sword: simultaneously strengthening democratic accountability and enabling manipulation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Expand Digital Literacy Campaigns Targeted programs should be launched to train citizens, especially rural populations and youth, on how to evaluate online content, identify misinformation, and practice responsible sharing. Schools, NGOs, and community groups should be at the forefront of this effort.

2. Strengthen Fact-Checking Ecosystem Fact-checking organisations such as Dubawa and Africa Check should be supported through partnerships with media outlets, universities, and civil society. A broader reach can help counter viral misinformation across both Twitter and WhatsApp.
3. Address the Rural–Urban Digital Divide Policies should prioritise expanding internet access in rural areas and integrating community radio with digital campaigns. This hybrid communication model can ensure inclusive participation in civic discourse.
4. Develop Balanced and Transparent Regulation While regulation is necessary to curb harmful content, Nigeria must avoid authoritarian measures such as the 2021 Twitter ban, which undermined public trust. Comparative lessons can be drawn from the EU’s Digital Services Act, which strikes a balance between oversight and free expression.
5. Encourage Further Empirical Research Larger surveys, longitudinal content analyses, and interviews with activists, journalists, and policymakers are needed to deepen understanding of how digital activism and misinformation evolve in Nigeria’s political landscape.

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