

222 Days of Platform Lockdown: Circumvention Culture, Digital Activism and Internet Censorship

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Abstract

This work investigates internet censorship in Nigeria, describing experiences and citizens' led circumvention practices following the ban of Twitter by the Nigerian government. Based on a quantitative survey and qualitative interview of active Twitter users in Lagos and Abuja Nigeria, the research realizes and categorizes circumvention practices embraced within the period of effecting the ban into technology, self-censorship, and platform jumping. This study further investigates how circumvention culture have become a form of digital activism and how the social media environment in democracies have experienced censorship within the last few decades. Citizenry experiences and the complexities of fight against platform lockdown and the role of digital activism prior to censorship is also analyzed. Internet censorship is new in Nigeria and has bred uncertainties among user practices and government censorship perseverance. This study contributes to a broader understanding of how circumvention practices have become cultural practices and experiences that emerge as embodied internet war against censorship and the preemptive and predictive conditions of inefficiency of internet censorship policies in established democracies.

Keywords: Internet, Social Media, Twitter, Circumvention, Censorship, digital activism, democracy, Platform, Lockdown, Shutdown, social movements

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1. Introduction

On October 3, 2020 in Nigeria, a video went viral on Twitter and other social media platforms. This video showed officials of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a Nigerian police force unit, killing a man, and as claimed in this video, these officials left their victim by the roadside and took his Lexus SUV. Following the virality of this video, a massive online protest took over the Nigerian social media space, especially on Twitter. Slowly, these digital activist efforts mobilized and metamorphosed into one of the largest protest movements in Nigeria in recent years birthing the infamous #EndSARS protests against police brutality, online and offline. Weeks following this social movement across Nigeria, reports of Nigerian state sponsored military, police and thugs coordinated attacks against protesters and massive killings followed suit ([BBC, 2021](#)). The Nigerian government accused #EndSARS protesters of attempting a coup against a democratically elected government ([Egbas, 2021](#)), claiming sponsorship from international influence hunting protest participants through threats, detention and frozen assets ([Premium Times, 2020](#)). Particularly, the Nigerian government accused Twitter and its CEO as at 2021, Jack Dorsey of being liable to Nigerian losses during the #EndSARS protest ([The Guardian, 2021](#)) and overtime demonstrated animosity against the platform, as a mobilizing platform social movement against bad governance. On June 4, 2021, the Nigerian government announced the banning of Twitter after citing “the persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria’s corporate existence” ([TheInformant247, 2021](#)).

1.1 Background

On June 2, 2021, Twitter deleted one tweet from a thread of tweets by Mohammadu Buhari, the president of Nigeria, and suspended the account to a read-only mode for 12 hours. Twitter stated that the tweet which referred to the 1967-1970 Nigerian-Biafra civil war violated its abusive behavior policy ([Akinwutu, 2021](#)) by threatening a repeat of the civil war that is widely considered a genocide. Angered by this development, the Nigerian government responded with an indefinite ban on Twitter in a statement by the Ministry of Information and Culture which partly read: “The Federal Government has suspended, indefinitely, the operations of the microblogging and social networking service, Twitter, in Nigeria” ([CNN, 2021](#)). For 222days, 5 June 2021 – 13 January

2022, Twitter was inaccessible in the Nigerian internet space. However, users were unhindered, and they kept tweeting from Nigeria. The eventual unbanning was announced on 12 January 2022 with an unclear and unsubstantiated claim that Twitter as a company has agreed to meet all conditions established by the government for it to be unbanned for use in Nigeria.



Figure 1: President Buhari's deleted tweet for violating Twitter rules

Twitter is a widely used platform in Nigeria where issues of public concern are frequently debated on and this suspension have been widely criticized round the world as a censorship against free speech and against the principles of democracy which Nigeria was meant to be projecting and protecting. According to NOI social media poll report (2019), out of 120 million Nigerians with internet access, 39.6 million Nigerians had a Twitter account; this represents 20% of the Nigerian population. A deeper reflection on the use of Twitter in the national and daily living in Nigeria shows that 46% of Twitter users use the platform to get trending news (33%), social interaction (21%), business advertisement (20%), employment opportunities (18%). On a measure of impact, 29% use Twitter for advocacy, 25% for easier connectivity, 17% for better social interaction, 13% for advertisement, 8% for instant information and 7% for employment opportunities. On public discourse, journalism has ceased to be a monopoly of the journalist. Social media has given rise to citizen journalism and Twitter plays an important role in this sphere. Whether literate, rural semi-

literate or a complete illiterate, social media allows anyone who has internet access the freedom of expression which traditional media limited. A journalist has been made out of every Nigerian who can afford access to Twitter (Anyanwu & Ibagere, 2021). For the Nigerian government, banning Twitter and instructing the telecommunication providers to cut off access to the website wasn't enough – on June 5, 2021, the attorney general of Nigeria, Abubakar Malami said the country will prosecute those who flout the government order to deactivate operations of twitter (Erezi, 2021). This is after realizing that within 24hours of effecting the ban, citizens and organizations operating in Nigeria through different circumvention practices were still actively using Twitter. Additionally, the government through its broadcast regulatory board, Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), ordered all broadcasting stations in Nigeria to suspend the use of the popular microblogging platform, ordering that they de-install twitter handles and “desist from using twitter as a source (UGC) of information gathering for News and programmes presentation especially Phone-in” (Olufemi, 2021).

While Nigeria is celebrated as one of the few African countries attracting investment into the tech ecosystem, alarms have been raised severally over the governments' quest to limit the freedom of expression, especially on social media. Arguably, President Buhari came to power using social media as part of his major campaign strategy, but have severally made attempt to stiffen free speech on social media. One of the bills presented in the national senate even went as far as proposing the death penalty for those found guilty of 'hate speech'. Shortly after the victory of President Buhari, his political party chieftain, a lawmaker, Senator Ibn Bala Na'Allah, representing Kebbi South pushed in the house of assembly for the social media bill tagged “Prohibit Frivolous Petitions and Other Matters Connected Therewith”. The presidency disassociated itself from this bill, which partly intends to criminalize the use of “abusive words” on social media (Onele, 2015). However, after a failed attempt to pass the bill, the senate once again in 2019 introduced the bill sponsored by Senator Mohammed Sani Musa, member of the ruling party representing Niger East constituency. This time entitled, “Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations Bill, 2019 (SB.132)” was very clear in its stand to regulate social media, and soon became the most trending news topic in Nigeria as the government strongly backed the bill (Umoru, 2019). Trying from a different approach, after the infamous #EndSARS protests in Nigeria that led to the killing of many young Nigerians by the Nigerian military (Orjinmo, 2020); following the 'Lekki Massacre' on 20 October 2020, the government launched a fresh campaign to regulate social media, aiming to allow

law enforcement to shut down the internet at will. Senator Mohammed Tahir Monguno, another chieftain of the ruling party introduced the bill which was called the ‘National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech’ that says: “Internet providers who do not comply will pay a 10 million naira fine or face a three-year jail term; There is 300,000 naira fine for making statements that “diminish public confidence” (Ayeni, 2020). Tankovska, 2021

With over 3.6 billion people using social media worldwide as at 2020, a number projected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025, social media usage is the most popular internet engagement (Tankovska, 2021) and the medium remains one of the most important tools for communication, where people express themselves, share opinions, receive information, news and entertainment. The power of expression granted to citizens through social media has elevated the medium to the role of a fourth arm of government, especially in democratic countries. This however, isn’t limited to the form of government, democratic, autocratic or otherwise; social media has served as a coordinating tool for most political movements globally in the last two decades. As a political tool, it provides citizens easier access to share and receive information that supports coordination of protests and organized demonstrations while holding government accountable in daily policies (Shirky, 2011). The 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran; the Arab Spring which started in 2010; the Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010; the Million People March in the Philippines of 2013 and even the #EndSARS 2020 movement in Nigeria among many others are examples of political actions coordinated round the globe through use of social media tools of instant messaging, photo sharing and social networking. Many autocratic and democratic governments have made significant moves in their respective nations to suppress this power of social media. Through internet censorship and targeted regulations or platform lockdown, the citizens’ media power is being attacked, curtailed and repressed by these regimes. While some governments introduce outright ban, some others introduce regulations disguised as efforts to protect their citizens against libelous and seditious contents – even when there are other laws protecting citizens against these offenses, the usual difference is that these new regulations target specifically the internet and in most cases, social media.

1.2 Statement of Purpose

The main purpose of this thesis is **to explore circumvention as a cultural practice and a form of digital activism in response to internet censorship**. Specifically, the study examines citizen's response to internet censorship in democracies. It intends to start by giving account of media censorship in Nigeria, and providing analysis into efforts by democratic governments to achieve internet censorship. The citizens in different forms of circumvention practices meet repressions against the use of social media and by extension, the internet with resistance. Is this a form of digital activism? How about the social media environments in democracies that have experienced censorship within the last two decades, are the citizenry experiences a consequence of digital activism? What about the complexities of fight against censorship? This study hope to contribute to a broader understanding of how circumvention practices have become cultural practices that emerge as embodied internet war against censorship and the preemptive and predictive conditions of inefficiency of internet censorship policies in established democracies. This work attempts to explore media experiences based on quantitative survey and qualitative interviews to identify the practices adopted by Nigerian Twitter users, and in extension achieve a comparative analysis with other democratic nations experiencing internet censorship.

Research Questions

1. What circumvention practices are embraced in response to censorship?
2. In what sense can circumvention practices be regarded as a form of activism?
3. What are the implication of circumvention practices?
4. How are circumvention practices becoming a cultural engagement that emerge as embodied internet war against censorship especially in young democracies?

1.3 Significance of Study

Studies on digital activism have long been focused on the Global North, and a research as this with main focus on Nigeria, the largest black nation and one of the biggest developing nations and biggest young democracy of the Global South is significant in both contributing to knowledge and expanding possibilities for recommendations in tackling the issues concerning digital activism, censorship and circumvention. Importantly, there are not many known researches that focuses on data from actual practices and experiences of circumvention tool users. Due to the need to combine technical knowledge with nontechnical familiarity or the interdisciplinary nature of this study, a combination of methods is required to achieve a justified study – hence, this may be a reason why there are not many studies focused on users who do the actual circumvention of internet censorship. As acknowledged by (Al-Saqaf, 2014), there are ethical considerations in the study of the subject of censorship and circumvention, more so, circumvention as a form of digital activism or activist media practice. The study on geoblocking (Lobato & Meese, 2016b) focused on global video cultures highlighting circumvention tools in comparison among nine countries. Prior to that, (Villeneuve, 2007) in “Evasion Tactics” presented a nontechnical analysis of tactics used to evade internet censorship with focus on how technology plays a significant role in this evasion. It is important to also mention that while circumvention may generally be viewed as useful tactic for internet liberty, it is necessary to study its development into an internet culture as it can also aid unlawful and harmful activities.

This study brings Nigerian users in perspective and unfolds an initially non-existent knowledge on ‘evasion tactics’ and other practices associated with circumvention in Nigeria. I believe it is a research novelty, largely because Twitter ban in Nigeria is unprecedented or any social media ban at that. However unprecedented the Nigerian case may be, researchers have provided studies describing the internet censorship circumvention, the motivations, tools, techniques, methods and possible approaches in diverse context and countries. In Caliskan, (2017, pp. 134–135) Risk Analysis of Internet Censorship Circumvention, five subcategories of tools and techniques of circumvention were listed:

Open DNS (when filtering is implemented by changing DNS servers to redirect requests for blocked websites to another websites, users have a possibility of using a different DNS

server); Virtual Private Networks – VPN (this channels all or some part of network traffic through a different middle node allowing circumvention by being encrypted and allowing connection to a computer that does not reside in a restricted environment); Onion Routing (a network mechanism that ensure contents are encrypted and invokes anonymity between communicators); Web proxy (this provides a web interface for its users, enabling circumvention by transmitting a user's request and passing it to the server requested for connection); SSH Proxy (Just like the VPNs, SSH Proxy generate encrypted connection via SSH and channels web requests via SOCKS5 proxy to the encrypted SSH connection).

Beyond the categorization of the internet censorship circumvention practices adopted in Nigeria, this study hopes to portray the systems of patterns if any, the embrace of circumvention as an activist move and a cultural media practice in the face of censorship even among young democracies, the developing world.

2. Previous Research

Many researches have previously been conducted on the three arms of this study: circumvention, digital activism and internet censorship. These researches are established in different contexts and study focuses, however, in this section, I will summarize and highlight previous studies that shine light on internet censorship and digital activism in the context of circumvention practices. The section starts with a historical overview of media censorship (the internet inclusive) in Nigeria. From Nigeria's independence as a nation from Britain in 1960 until today, through survival of countless military regimes to its current young democracy of about 22 years: both the military governments and their democratic counterparts at different times have imagined, developed structures and implemented strategies aiming to limit free speech. While there is evident growth from historical perspective, the last few years have come with a turn of events that see more and more efforts to censor the media, especially the internet.

When accredited agencies of government are implementing the blocking, filtering or outright online platform lockdowns, or when private organizations either on the behest of the government or their own initiatives are allowed to lead such control or suppression of online access and contents, then we can define such action as internet censorship (Vareba et al., 2017). This varies from country to country and from type of governance practices. While internet censorship puts restriction on access to information or ability to share information, it sometimes aim at protecting the citizens from illegality. This section explores platform lockdown as a form of censorship, aiming to x-ray the answers provided by previous researches on why governments lockdown. Also, examples of such lockdowns round the world are briefly reviewed while analyzing what platform lockdown means.

In the same vein, the review of the concept of circumvention as a response to censorship is featured in this chapter. The concept is well established as a research subject in the area of technology that mediates 'media' experiences. However, this section draws an intersection that captures circumvention as a digital activism practice. Digital media, activism and democracy as subject areas of interest to this study are reviewed, of course, not in isolation but in relation to the overall concept of internet censorship.

2.1 Censorship – A Historical Reflection and the Nigeria Case

Ranking Nigeria 120th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2021 World Press Freedom Index, the organization described Nigeria as “one of West Africa’s most dangerous and difficult countries for journalist” (RSF, 2021). This record might have been better sometime in history, but Nigeria has never been notable for free press. Although since independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria’s constitution has always featured and expressed freedom of expression throughout all the republics of the nation’s history. However, expression of freedom in Nigerian constitution and laws right from the beginning has never been fully guaranteed (Ojo, 1976).

2.1.1 Media Censorship

The provisions contained in the republican constitution of the new nation in 1963, section 25, which was a re-enactment of section 24 of the independence constitution of 1960, discussed “Freedom of Expression –

- (1) Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference”

The sub-section 2 of section 25 clarifying the situations for freedom of expression as enshrined added

“(2) nothing in this section shall invalidate any law that is reasonably justifiably in a democratic society –

- (a) in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health;
- (b) for the purpose of protecting the rights, reputations and freedom of other persons, preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, maintaining the authority and independence of the courts or regulating telephony, wireless broadcasting, television, or the exhibition of cinematograph films; or
- (c) imposing restrictions upon persons holding office under the State, members of the armed forces of the State or members of a police force.”

Interpreting the limitations of free speech as seen in the constitution on issues of public safety, public order, morality, health or even the nation's defence has always been the weak point and thin line for censorship. The regulation of the mass media remained in the domain of state governments until July 1975 when the federal government took over this role (Saidu, 2014). The reason for the takeover was mainly to make sure that the media served 'national interest' and avoid proliferation of networks.

“By 1977, the Federal Government had, by Decree 24, taken over all regional television stations and merged them with other broadcasting stations to form the Nigerian Television (NTV) (now Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). The merged stations include the Western Nigerian Television (WNTV), the Eastern Nigerian Television (ENTV), the Radio Kaduna Television (RKTV), the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), the MidWest Television, and the Benue-Plateau Television Corporation (BPTV). It also merged the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation (established by an Act of Parliament No. 39 of 1956) with the Broadcasting Company of Northern Nigeria (BCNN) to form the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) by virtue of Decree No. 8 of 1979 with retrospective effect from 1st April, 1978. The News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), the official news reporting agency in Nigeria, was established on May 10, 1976” (Saidu, 2014, pp. 129–130).

Free speech or media freedom is not a new discourse in the context of Nigerian politics and democracy. The debates about the rights and obligations of the Nigerian press during the second republic (started in 1979 with the emergence of a new democratic government headed by Shehu Shagari) and the third republic (1992-1993) are similar. The Report of the Political Bureau review noted critics on the constitution's failure to make provisions that protects the press such as guaranteeing that the press have the right to write, inform and educate the public without fear of censorship, intimidation, molestation, or restraint to personal liberty of the writer, subject to existing laws of sedition (Agbaje, 1990). The report further summarizes the two shades of opinion on media ownership/control and its relationship with press freedom (p. 207):

“Several contributors are of the view that government ownership of the mass media is undesirable, mainly because of what they perceive to be the lack of freedom for such media

as constituting an obstacle to public enlightenment and promotion of public discussion and, therefore, incompatible with popular democracy.”

The military era (1966–1979 and 1983–1999) was more brutal to press freedom with heavy clampdown on journalists and the press. Importantly, the current president of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari also has a place in history as a former military head of state and military dictator (1983–1985) who sacked the democratically elected government of the second republic through a military coup. The military faced a growing opposition from the media and in turn, the military government intensified “incorporationist strategies by purging state-owned media in order to ensure not only that they were compliant, but also that they also aggressively tackled the aroused opposition” (Olukotun, 2004, p. 37). Successful military administration exerted enormous control over the media, limited press engagements and freedom in every possible way and ensured they had a firm grip on media agenda setting. For example, the military government of General Ibrahim Babangida detained the managing director of New Nigeria newspaper, Mr. Mohamed Haruna, for one week over the content and comments of the paper and later sacked him; family members are taken hostage for a journalist declared wanted by the government (Olukotun, 2004, p. 38). Other notable repressive acts include: the arrest of Mr. Paxton Idowu along other six journalists in June 1989; arrest of Lewis Obi of African Concord; Dele Alake of Sunday Concord and other senior editors of Concord titles; arrest of Mr. Chris Okolie and other staff of Newbreed magazine; and the closure of several media houses and further arrests against the media in succeeding years. Also during the era of military dictator, Abacha, the media were further tackled and censorship was a strategy tool for the government. As described in Olukotun (2004, p. 62):

“the dictator never obliged any Nigerian media with an interview during his rule, while for three consecutive years, 1996 to 1998, he was named as one of the top enemies of the press by a US-based Committee for the Protection of Journalists (CPJ).”

The death of Abacha gave way to the fourth Nigerian republic starting from 1999 till today; a transition to civilian rule that gave the press a breathing space after a prolonged military rule and successive authoritarian regimes. The media’s long fought recognition as a sort of fourth arm of the government was somewhat achieved as the idea of the media as a watchdog of public interest became crucial for the new democracy. It was a popular expectation that the media would promote

democracy, advancing its cause by holding elected government to highest standards of governance and this to be done without censorship or obstruction as was pervasive during the era of dictatorship. It was a perception with “constitutional recognition in Section 22 of the 1999 Constitution, which specifically requires the media to monitor governance and to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the governed to the people” (Olukoyun, 2004). However, while media tried to hold the government accountable, the government on the other hand have tried to censor the media. In cases it is not working towards outright censorship, the government has often exerted control measures on media, especially ensuring that the state-owned media organizations do not tackle the actions of the government.

One study on the control of the ruling political party on Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) between 1999-2015 revealed that FRCN between the period under study has been dominated, controlled and dictated by the ruling PDP, reporting issues unethically (Bashir, 2019). Also recounting attacks on the press in 2001, a publication of Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) (2002) has this to say:

“Despite the dynamism and increasing freedom of the Nigerian press, journalists must still contend with harsh laws and regulations. In addition to criminal defamation, journalists must contend with Decree 60, a 1999 law that created the government-appointed Press Council. Decree 60 also mandates state accreditation of journalists.”

In 2004 there were several documented cases of government attack on media (CPJ, 2005), for example, on September 4, the government security agents of State Security Service (SSS) broke into the offices of the private Lagos-based Insider Weekly confiscating all of the media organizations equipment and papers, sealing off the office after arresting some employees. In the same year, a controversial Journalism Enhancement Bill was introduced in the House of Representatives which alarmed local journalists and press freedom organizations because of provisions that “could quash critical reporting – notably, the establishment of a Media Practitioners Complaints Commission with the power to punish journalists who violate broadly defined standards.” Irrespective of certain patches of censorship by the government, the freedom enjoyed by Nigerian media have been unprecedented. In 2011, President Goodluck Jonathan signed into law the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act (Campbell, 2011). It was a historic success in the quest

for transparency and support to access to information from government institutions. The bill, which was introduced in 1999, was not passed into law in the administration of former President Olusegun Obasanjo; after 10 years of tireless struggle by media organizations, unions and civil societies, the bill was finally assented to.

2.1.2 Internet Censorship in Nigeria

The emergence of internet radicalized the flow of information and revolutionized access to information and means of holding the government accountable in Nigeria. The last two decades have seen enormous progress in this aspect. However, with the second coming of Mohammodu Buhari as the head of government in Nigeria, the dreaded clampdown on media is resurrected. Started with anti-social media bill which Nigerians got the first whiff when the president declined to assent to the Digital Rights Bill that was supposed to protect the fundamental rights of Nigerians on the internet and further ensure their safety and wellbeing (Paul, 2019). While the anti-social media bill is being protested against, the government went further to ban Twitter. In extension of the systemic attack on press, online and offline information flow has been indirectly declared enemy by the government. Between January and September 2019, at least 19 journalists suffered attack perpetrated by Nigerian authorities (Amnesty International, 2019), and in 2020, a total of 60 journalists suffered 51 different crimes between January and October majority of which were perpetrated by the Nigerian government (Article 19, 2020).

To legitimize press control, the national assembly have sort to pass the Press Council Bill 2018, which seeks to regulate journalism in Nigeria by establishing a statutory body and as well unduly interfere in the operations of media as a business, and seek to criminalize citizen journalism (Suraj, 2020). Censorship of broadcast media has already been in place and firmly effected by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) ordering cease of broadcast to any programme the government feels uncomfortable with and often slamming heavy fines on stations. The bills to amend the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) Act, and the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) Act sponsored by Mr. Olusegun Odeunmi, Chairman, House Committee on Information and Orientation, would be placing a responsibility to control the media on the Minister of Information while making free press a dangerous enterprise. “For instance, the proposed Section 33(1) of the NPC Act makes it an offence to own, publish or print a newspaper, magazine or journal, without

documentation with the council, and provides N5 million fine or a jail term of three years or both, as penalty” (The Nation, June 29, 2021).

On July 12 2021, Nigerian Union of Journalists, Nigerian Guild of Editors and Newspaper Publishers Association of Nigerian united in their protest against the bills by sponsoring an “Information Blackout” (See figure 2) across major national newspapers (Erezi, 2021).



Figure 2: “Information Blackout” protest by major national dailies in Nigeria on July 12, 2021

Despite the protests and rising consciousness of the public against censorship, the government stifling of free speech has remained on the rise. On July 16 2021, a letter surfaced, signed by Francisca Aiyetan, Director of Broadcast Monitoring, the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission directed radio and television stations not to “glamourise the nefarious activities of insurgents, bandits and kidnappers ” in their reports (The Nation, July 17, 2021). The circular entitled ‘Newspaper Reviews and Current Affairs Programmes: A Need For Caution’ claimed that headlines are replete with security concerns and jeopardize the efforts of Nigerian soldiers and other security outfits.

Back in 1995, Nigeria made significant efforts to criminalize cyber offences with the draft legislation of the Electronic Crimes, Telecommunications and Postal Offences Decree. Vareba et al., (2017) captured this and other cybercrime bills adopted by the Nigerian government at different times including the Computer Security and Infrastructure Bill of 2005, the 2008 Electronic Provisions Bill, the 2011 Cyber Security Bill the Electronic Transfer of Funds Crime Bill of 2011 and the Criminal Code Amendment for Offences Relating to Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes of 2011 (p. 27). Vareba et al., (2017) further noted that since 2015 the government has increasingly adopted internet censorship measures, sometimes through judicial or legislative authorities and other times through arguably illegal exercise of executive powers. During the presidency of Goodluck Jonathan, in a guise of fighting cyber criminality, or fighting the Islamic terrorist group (Boko Haram) which was ravaging the Northeastern part of the country embraced restriction to internet connectivity, blocking or removal of online contents as a solution. At other times, instituted series of seasonal Internet shutdowns like in the three states of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe from May to December 2013 and in March 2014 is embraced to hamper terrorists and insurgent groups’ use of telecommunications to coordinate their military attacks in these regions.

Internet security and the implementation of internet censorships to protect citizens in many countries are characterized by mismanagement of private information, abuse of digital rights and disrespect of internet freedoms (Vareba et al., 2017). Also, the desire to fight or punish political opposition see an unrepentant use of internet censorship as a tool of intimidation. The opposition party during the previous Nigerian government administration suffered these restrictions, as detailed by Vareba et al., (2017) – “During the 2015, the National Communications Council (NCC) shut down an SMS short code used by the All Progressive Congress – the then opposition party –

to fundraise.” Unfortunately, the then opposition won the elections, took over power in 2015, and now fully embraced the same tactics to silent the new opposition voices and digital activists.

2.2 Platform Lockdown and Circumvention

2.2.1 Lockdown and Shutdown

In the quest to answer the question of when and why states lockdown digital platforms, (Howard et al., 2011) constructed an event log database of 566 platform lockdown/shutdown incidents and concluded that reasons behind such lockdown cuts across two broad themes: protecting political authority and preserving the public go. The first theme captures reasons like protecting political leaders and state institutions; election crisis; eliminating propaganda; mitigating dissidence; and national security, with national security topping the chart in their findings. The second theme on the other hand captures preserving cultural and religious morals; preserving racial harmony; protecting children; cultural preservation; protecting individuals' privacy; and dissuading criminal activity with preserving cultural and religious morals topping the chart. Many other literatures agrees with these themes. (Al-Saqaf, 2014) mentioned that China is famous among researchers as an authoritarian state who considers platform lockdown as a means of controlling information in the cyberspace on legally justified grounds of contents that disturb social order, or on the grounds of protecting national security. Democracies on the other hand engage based on three premise: the protection of minors, intellectual property protection, and online security.

Platform lockdown comes in various tactics and levels of severity. Just like the Nigerian Twitter case, government platform lockdown could mean outright forceful shutdown of specific websites with the support from the technical infrastructure or internet providers in the country or it could mean denying access to specific contents. The extreme situation involves the shutting down of the entire internet space and mobile networks, which have been experienced in many countries like Bangladesh. (Howard et al., 2011) emphasizes the difference between democracies and authoritarian governments in platform lockdown. While authoritarian governments do this glaringly against opposition and as a tool of clamping down on perceived propaganda, democratic governments project the savior message – trying to protect children or avoid illegality. Also,

democracies are much more likely to engage in online content censorship than other tactics of platform lockdown. An example of earliest case of a democracy shutting down online subnetworks was in 1995 when German authorities removed access to over 200 Internet newsgroups deemed indecent and offensive (Howard et al., 2011). In recent years, many democracies have adopted different subtle tactics of occasional platform lockdown or subtle forms of internet censorship – the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, South Korea (Al-Saqaf, 2014), India (Momen et al., 2020), Spain (Sampedro et al., 2021) and Indonesia where in 2019, the government slowed or blocked internet access three times (Safitri & Noviadhista, 2020).

2.2.2 Circumvention and Resistance Practices

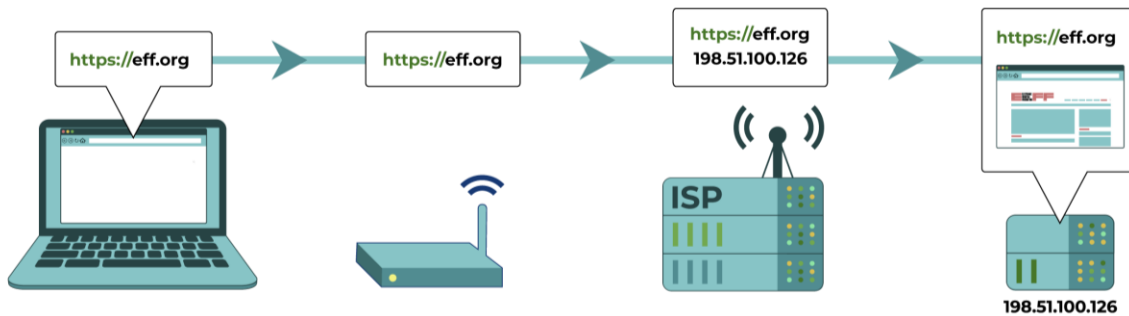
Humans to bypass institutional limitations to achieve intended goals have always created circumvention options. With the advancement and polarization of technology, circumvention became easier and easily accessible in almost all given opportunities. In media sports for example, television networks spend lots of money to secure the exclusive rights to stream sport events. Consequently, people are locked out of access to such events if they can't follow the established and mostly commercial means of access by these networks. Recently, Amazon finalized an 11-year deal with National Football League of the U.S to get the exclusive media rights of the sports (Young, 2021). For the system to work, the partnering organizations depend on geographical exclusivity, which is however challenged by:

“a range of alternative models and viewing practices that circumvent these broadcast arrangements: live-streaming; using circumvention technologies such as VPNs to access geoblocked content; uploading highlights on social media platforms; and purchasing cheap overseas cable decoder boxes” (Meese & Podkalicka, 2016)

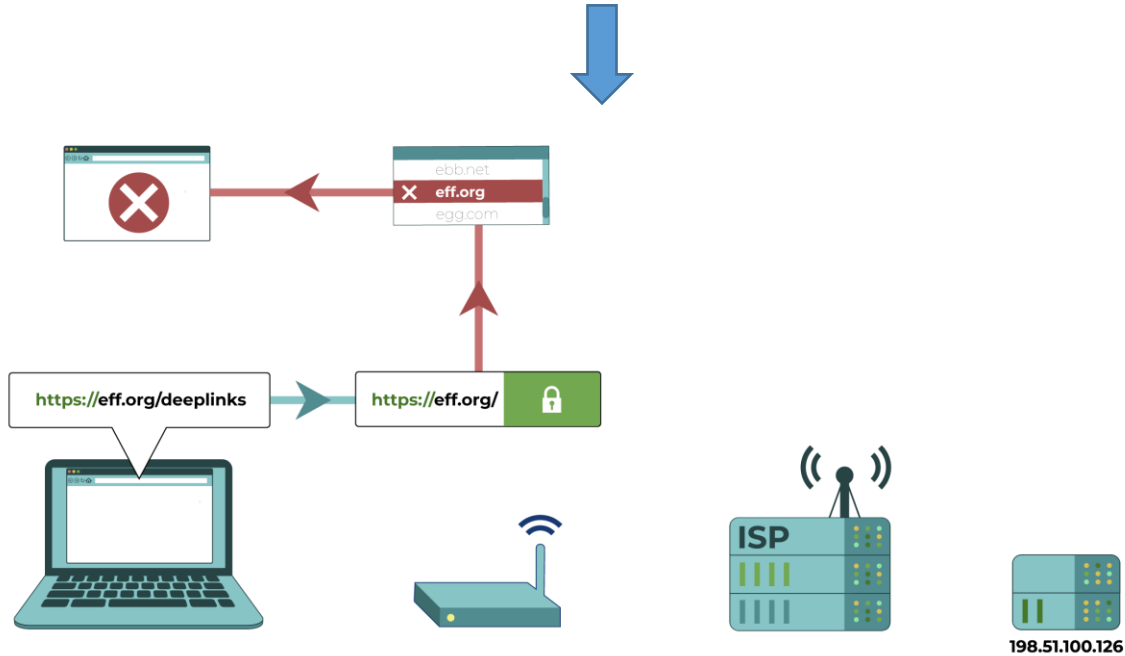
The banning of Twitter in Nigeria to censor free speech would have been implemented through geoblocking efforts, using softwares to prevent people within the Nigerian geography from accessing Twitter website. However, many Nigerians kept tweeting, despite blocking of Twitter and arrest threats by the Nigerian government (BBC, June 8, 2021).

Figure 3: How Blocking Happens (Source: Surveillance Self-Defense, 2020)

1.



2.



1. Your computer tries to connect to `https://eff.org`, which is at a listed IP address (the numbered sequence beside the server associated with EFF's website). The request for that website is made and passed along to various devices, such as your home network router and your Internet Service Provider (ISP), before reaching the intended IP address of `https://eff.org`. The website successfully loads for your computer.

2. *HTTPS site filtering: When accessing sites over HTTPS, all of the content is encrypted except the name of the site. Since they can still see the site name, Internet Service Providers or local network administrators can decide which sites to block access to. A computer attempts to access eff.org/deeplinks. The network administrator (represented by a router) is able to see domain (eff.org) but not the full website address after the slash. The network administrator can decide which domains to block access to.*

Figure 3 shows the internet blocking situation obtainable in the case of Nigeria and Twitter. Aside the HTTPS site filtering, there are many other means of blocking which include IP address blocking, keyword filtering, DNS blocking, protocol/port blocking, or network shutdown ([Surveillance Self-Defense, 2020](#)).

In China where there is active internet blocking project called The Great Firewall (GFW) among other enormous information control systems, users have developed a series of tool and strategies based on VPNs, proxy networks and encryption technologies as counterprotocols for circumvention ([Li, 2016](#)). In Turkey, where since 2007, the internet censorship law “Internet Law No. 5651” has been effective; users have heavily relied on circumvention practices like using alternative DNS providers and VPN services to access blocked contents ([Akgül & Kırılıdoğ, 2015](#); [Bozdag, 2016](#)). For countries where the concerns are not government censorship, circumvention tools and their relevance have been on a steady growth. Australians are accessing US Netflix, Hulu, HBO Now, BBC iPlayer and satisfying entertainment enthusiasm using circumvention tools ([Lobato & Meese, 2016a](#)) and in Sweden it can be said that circumvention tools are important aspect of online culture especially in the quest to protect privacy and access entertainment contents ([Baumann, 2016](#)). In Malaysia, there are two main uses of circumvention practices: to access global video content and to avoid government surveillance ([Hanchard, 2015](#)). Also, it is relevant to acknowledge that aside the use of technical tools and systems that ensure progressive access to internet content, there is an aspect of psychologically induced circumvention practices. This is where censorship’s impact on user behavior influence and see to users avoidance of blocked content but a wider embrace of alternatives in a form of platform jumping, obedience to constituted authority or moral compass.

2.2.3 Technologies: Censorship and Circumvention

(Subramanian, 2011) categorized strategies adopted to effect censorship into: Controlling the intermediary; controlling the financial intermediary; controlling the conduit; establishing gatekeeper systems; filtering and censorship; controlling the standards; and total blockade. In this categorization Subramanian explained efforts adopted by governments in the past to control the internet. There is a case of French government and Yahoo, an American company, where the court ruled that Yahoo is prohibited from advertising or promoting/sales of neo-Nazi merchandize. This ruling is despite Yahoo's argument that they are not a French company, but rather an American company which shared these supposed merchandize on the web. Yahoo was forced to pull off these merchandize to avoid been banned from operating in France. Through controlling the intermediary or controlling the financial intermediary or even controlling the conduit like the internet service providers, elaborate technology is not required to effect censorship on the part of government. However, in implementing censorship strategies effectively, technology plays a central role. Subramanian's (2011) example with China shows elaborate system for controlling and censorship. With the use of Internet Gateway Routers, the Chinese government filters incoming and outgoing packets that do not meet the government approval. Such filtering are routers supplied by an American company, Cisco Systems (p. 79) and another is the "Green Dam" software developed in China (p. 83). Iran, another example, acquired filtering software and hardware from Secure Computing/McAfee and Nokia Siemens Networks (p. 80). These software and hardware are combined with local technology to effect extensive censorship that satisfies mostly government's quest to preserve itself and avoid opposition. Yet another example, Saudi Arabia, established a proxy server, as a gatekeeper system to control contents accessible to its citizens. Tunisia on the other hand, aside the use of "SmartFilter" which Saudi Arabia also uses, a software produced by Secure Computing, which was acquired by McAfee, a US company, had easily effected control through the state owned Internet service provider, Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) which even leased bandwidths to other internet service providers in the country. Saudi Arabia moved a step further to provide a list of filtering software (Cybersitter, Netnanny, CyberPatrol, CyberSentinel, Cyber Snoop, SurfWatch, WebChaperone, and X-Stop – (p. 83)) for individuals and families to ensure their own self-controlled internet consumption. In Myanmar, the government purchased Fortinet Fortiguard firewall product manufactured by Fortinet, a US

company. Also, the state controlled internet service provider – Bagan Cybertech used DansGuardian filtering software to block internet access to specific sites (Subramanian, 2011, p. 83).

Technology is central to internet control. As a technology platform, it takes technology to limit access to the internet, and it is effected through the use of laws or regulations or directly by establishing technology possibilities under the ownership of the government.

“In 2003, China released a new standard for wireless communications – WLAN Authentication and Privacy Infrastructure (WAPI), and mandated that this standard be included in all wireless devices sold in China starting in 2004. An interesting aspect of this new protocol was that it required both the sender and the WAP to register with a central WAPI server that would authenticate the connection. To many privacy activists, this was an overt attempt by the Chinese government to monitor wireless users through a standards based mechanism.” (Subramanian, 2011, p. 81)

Circumvention systems operate like technologies belonging to two sides of a coin with their censorship counterparts. Proxy servers, anonymizers, translators are great technology means to circumvent internet restrictions (Subramanian, 2011, p. 85). In their work showing how people around the world negotiate different kinds of blocks, including both commercial geo-blocking and government censorship, (Lobato & Meese, 2016b), different researchers highlighted tools and habits in comparison of nine countries – China, Australia, Turkey, Sweden, Malaysia, Brazil, Iran, Cuba and the United States. In china, the Great Firewall (GFW) is the censorship implementing technology, but what makes the “wall” more meaningful according to (Li, 2016) is the practice of “wall-crossing” (fanqiang) through the use of proxies, VPNs, and encryption technologies best described as ‘ladders’ (tizi). He lists the popular ladders to include:

“Tor (The Onion Router), Free-Gate (a proxy network system), Ultrasurf (a freeware based on proxy servers and encryption protocols), I2P (the Invisible internet Project, a free, open-source program for pseudonymous information transfer), Psiphone (a combination system developed by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto), and GoAgent (a cross-platform software). Other new weapons are constantly emerging, including VPN Gate (a free public-minded VPN service), Lantern (a P2P network where users share bandwidth), Pritunl (a enterprise distributed VPN server), Shadowsocks (a

socks5 server), FreeBrowser (a free internet browser for Android systems), and Fqrouter (a circumvention router for Android systems)” (p. 113).

The comparisons show that in all cases, the use of circumvention software, apps and plugins to change geographical location are central to the efficient act of circumvention.

2.3 Digital Media, Digital Activism and Democratization

With over 3.6 billion people using social media worldwide as at 2020, a number projected to increase to almost 4.41 billion in 2025, social media usage is the most popular internet engagement (Tankovska, 2021) and the medium remains one of the most important tools for communication, where people express themselves, share opinions, receive information, news and entertainment. The power of expression granted to citizens through social media has elevated the medium to the role of a fourth arm of government, especially in democratic countries. This however, isn't limited to the form of government, democratic, autocratic or otherwise; social media has served as a coordinating tool for most political movements globally in the last two decades. As a political tool, it provides citizens easier access to share and receive information that supports coordination of protests and organized demonstrations while holding government accountable in daily policies (Shirky, 2011). Citizens enjoy improved communication between their representatives through increased access to information, and this strengthens the democratic principles of transparency and opportunities for feedback (Della Porta, 2013).

2.3.1 #ThisFlag and the #ThisGown movements in Zimbabwe

In 2016, Zimbabwe experienced a massive wave of digital media influence on democratization. (Gukurume, 2017) shares a journey to the eventual regime change of the Robert Mugabe's administration in Zimbabwe in 2016. Pastor Evan Mawarire, a youthful cleric on 22 April same year recorded a video questioning the meanings attached to the Zimbabwe's national flag in light of the country's socio-economic woes and political challenges. Posted on social media, starting with Facebook, this video inspired the April – September protests that were witnessed in the

country. Within a week of publication, this viral video had accrued over 100,000 views and shares and further inspired a spirited campaign by the cleric and his followers where they recorded more videos on a daily basis questioning and challenging the political situation in the country. The digital movement geared at accountability, transparency and a fight against corruption and the delivery of political promises of the Mugabe's government including the promises of independence and the millions of jobs promised during previous elections. This digital movement metamorphosed into the #ThisFlag and the #ThisGown movements in Zimbabwe. Evaluating the youths leadership and involvement in digital activism and protests, (Gukurume, 2017) argues that "social media provides youths an opportunity to create their own counter-publics, where they can openly articulate their socio-economic and political grievances, as well as challenge the hegemonic political publics, which reproduce their marginal participation in mainstream politics" (p.58). This is acknowledged as an outcome from the rapid growth of mobile phone services, which leads the popularity of social media amongst the youths who live in urban areas. On the other hand, youths are at a receiving end of bad governance which they try to protest, relying on digital media platforms.

In Gukurume's research (Gukurume, 2017), the narratives of unemployment, poverty, state sponsored brutality, economic mismanagement and a general sense of marginality seemed to be dominant topics and had a direct effect on the youth population – keeping many of the youths perpetually in "a fixed and continuous present—epitomised by poverty and suffering." Political protests experienced in the last two decades shares these same factors in common – youth active participation, digital media platform and embraced activism: The 2009 uprising of the Green Movement in Iran; the Arab Spring which started in 2010; the Red Shirt uprising in Thailand in 2010; the Million People March in the Philippines of 2013; the #EndSARS 2020 movement in Nigeria. These among many others are examples of political actions coordinated round the globe through use of social media tools of instant messaging, photo sharing and social networking. On another hand, climate activism and other forms of social protests maximize digital media and activism to drive social changes. A popular means is the call for members of the public who believe in an intended goal to sign a petition for change.

2.3.2 The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria

The #EndSARS movement in Nigeria started with the sharing of videos and photos of Special Anti-Robbery Squared (SARS) officials killing a man and left him for dead by the roadside after taking his Lexus SUV in Ughelli Delta state of Nigeria on October 3, 2020. This information was first shared on Twitter, and soon spread to other social media platforms fueling outrage and passionate digital activism against the SARS under the hashtag #EndSARS – calling for the scrapping of this police unit. (Dambo et al., 2021) in their qualitative analysis of Twitter activity during the Lekki Shooting in Nigeria’s #EndSARS protests acknowledged that social media is allowing access to a cheaper and quicker mobilization resources for activists and importantly serving as a circumvention tool against the use of conventional communication networks. Surprisingly, the research work discovered that Nigerian Twitter users relied on foreign media for news coverage of #EndSARS while Nigerians in diaspora were active digital activists spreading information about the protests. What made #EndSARS different was mainly its ability to attract the attention of the international community and the significant leadership of digital technology and network. While The #EndSARS movement can be largely considered a leaderless digital movement which translated to physical protests, (Dambo et al., 2021) established the presence of influencers cutting across elected officials, foreign media, celebrities and activists and their representation of majority in a democratic sense. They argued that diaspora activists are important arsenal instrumental to drawing global attention to local protests, and these efforts are enabled evidently through social media.

Many autocratic and democratic governments have made significant moves in their respective nations to suppress the power of social media. Through internet censorship and targeted regulations, the citizens’ media power is being attacked, curtailed and repressed by these regimes. While some governments introduce outright ban, some others introduce regulations disguised as efforts to protect their citizens against libelous and seditious contents – even when there are other laws protecting citizens against these offenses, the usual difference is that these new regulations target specifically the internet and in most cases, social media.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Practice perspective

This study is designed on a framework of media practices and particularly capturing the dimensions of activist media practices, circumvention as a media practice in the context of freedom of speech, social movements, censorship and technology. Media objects and media people are central to the discussion of media practices, and as noted by (Mattoni & Treré, 2014, p.259):

“when referring to media objects, the emphasis is on media as technological supports and devices that surround people in their daily lives. When referring to media people, the emphasis is on the existence of individuals that interact with the media not simply because they are audiences of media messages, but because they produce media messages on a systematic and continuous basis, like media professionals working as journalists or practitioners, working on a voluntary basis.”

The practice perspective of circumvention, digital activism and internet censorship recognize the complex multi-faceted array of media technologies, professions and contents with which social movement actors interact (Mattoni, 2017). Importantly, “they historicize the use of media technologies in social movements; and they highlight the agency of social movement actors in relation to media technologies while avoiding a media-centric approach to the subject matter.” (Mattoni, 2017, p. 495). To answer the question of whether circumvention in this context is a form of digital activism, it is essential to embrace media as an open set of practices relating to, and oriented around, media. The practice perspective allows the placement of relevant considerations in the forerunning by being as open as possible in analyzing all existing practices. This in turn depends on how people understand what actions constitute a distinct practice – some practices work to enact new forms of categorization and distinction relied upon in other practices (Couldry, 2004). Just as (Couldry, 2004) further argued, ‘audiencing’ or what audience do in media is a distinctive set of practices rather than a slice through daily life that cuts across how they actually understand the practices in which they are engaged. While discussing problematic and antisocial interactions in the social media space, De Seta (2017) argued that media practices are complex arrangements of technologies and usages, the articulation of which is unavoidably grounded in individual and self-reflexive experiences across time and space. There are varieties of media

practice (Couldry, 2004) – an understanding that fuels the consideration of a range of practices, and the consequent or causal feature of the relationship between practices. To explain this variety, (Couldry, 2004) provided an example of watching football game on television which might be best analysed as an intense emotional engagement for one person, an ardent football fan. For another person, this might not be the case. That person's partner or child may be obligated or derive pleasure of that football game not from the media experience watching the game, but rather from their relationship together to share the first person's passion. For those who watch in public places, the pleasure may lie in the practice of group solidarity. (Couldry, 2004) concludes that the focus on theorizing media practice should not lie on these varieties, despite acknowledging its place, but on the relationship between those practices.

3.2 Activist Media Practices

This section presents three possible definitions: one is the definition of practice, the next is the definition of media practice and the third is the further definition of activist media practice. (Hobart, 2010) argues that practice are situated and can be those moments of slippage, change and openness partly contingent. It is not a natural object, but a frame of reference that we use to interrogate a complex reality (Hobart, 2010, p. 62). He further argues that practice is a replacement to the notions of system, structures, order and individuals; and “those recognized, complex form of social activity and articulation through which agents set out to maintain or change themselves, others and the world about them under varying conditions” (p.63).

Activist Media Practices are defined as:

“routinized and creative social practices in which activists engage and which include, first, interactions with media objects—such as mobile phones, laptops, pieces of paper—through which activists can generate and/or appropriate media messages, therefore acting either as media producers or media consumers; and, second, interactions with media subjects—such as journalists, public relations managers, but also activist media practitioners—who are connected to the media realm” (Mattoni & Treré, 2014) p. 259

Activists or social movement actors engage in media knowledge practices and rational media practices (Mattoni, 2013), where the former focuses on how activists interact with media messages “encompassing production of media literacy and self-reflexive perception of media interaction.”

By engaging in media knowledge practices, activists develop peculiar reactions towards platforms, technologies which plays a significant role in shaping interactions between these activists and media environments (Mattoni, 2013). The latter, “relational media practices refer to the construction and sustenance of network relations by individual activist and activist collectives with media professionals, technological support infrastructures and the creation of their own mediated communicative spaces” (Kaun 2016, p. 19).

What factors influence activist’s style of media interaction? McCurdy's (2013) concept of lay theories argue that activist have reflexive approach to media which translates to their understanding and interaction with these channels. While we establish that activist media practices can be seen as “both routinized and creative arrays of activists’ interactions with and understandings of media technologies, professions and roles” (Mattoni, 2017, p.496) it is necessary to establish also that there is an archaeological approach to media practices where there is need to consider materials that constitute media technologies in the context of its interactive use by activists (Kaun, 2016). Also discussing the changes over the years, (Kaun, 2016) highlighted that there is an evident shift from mechanical speed to digital immediacy through use of media technologies like Twitter as a platform of force on coordination of social movements. She further advocates for an integration of spatial practices, contentious action and media practices into each other while emphasizing the need for activists to maintain a focus on technology infrastructures. To this extent, what is needed is a democratic media activism, which addresses “institutional architectures, the production process, content, media audiences and most importantly the cultural and structural environment of communication institutions that are clearly linked to broader political struggles” (p. 47).

3.3 Circumvention as a Media Practice

“There are some media practices that might be able to change the very nature of other media practices: the way in which smartphones are embedded into the social practices of ordinary users, for instance, might change the way in which the same ordinary users access political news, express their political opinions, or participate in mobilizations.”

(Mattoni, 2017, p. 501)

Communication cultures are diverse and value placed on interactions in the media ecology are diverse among activists, media audience or media producers alike. The internet is transnational, cost-effective communication infrastructure and particularly help activists diffuse their causes (Kavada, 2013). The internet was designed as an open platform (Subramanian, 2011), if there are disruptions on some parts of the network, it was not designed to affect the other parts. With the growth of internet usage, it quickly became a means for an unfettered communication for activists and for activism.

Circumvention in the context of this study is a media practice where activists and citizens alike appropriate digital tools to satisfy usage. It can rightly be categorized as a media practice and examined from the perspective of knowledge and relational media usage. For many reasons people can be cut off from media access or access to their favorite platforms. In this case of mainstream media cutoff, alternative media offer audience a means of interaction among themselves, provide information and support, and when it takes on the nature of activism, it becomes a beacon of hope for marginalized groups to be heard (Waltz, 2005). Censorship acts by government have rather become a symbolic act, a tool of intimidation and delegitimization (Bozdag, 2016); blocking for example rather increases traffic to banned websites rather than stop it. Aside the cases of activism, popular global platforms for video sharing often restrict access in different forms from country to country, and in Malaysia for example, where these global video sharing platforms are more popular and dominate media consumption than local channels, circumvention often becomes a regular practice to ensure everyday access to these media consumption (Hanchard, 2015). In many cases, citizens do not circumvent in search of forbidden or access to blocked contents online. This is a case of persons using the numerous and available circumvention tools to facilitate their access to the internet, to communicate to their friends and family or access everyday social media platforms, share photos and music or in search for entertainment and news (Sohrabi & Dowran, n.d.).

Freedom of expression is not an absolute right – this is the argument when issues of libel and sedition or “national interest” are invoked to justify forms of restriction against free speech. Either way you see it, there is a weight of responsibility and risk associated with speech especially as a media practice. According to Vareba et al., (2017, p. 26), “the Internet censorship paradigm emerged out of a specific range of imperatives, otherwise called pressures. These pressures or imperatives may be summed up as follows:

- The need to ensure national security
- The protection of minors against abusive online contents
- The need to protect human dignity through checking incidences of hate speeches, racial discriminatory messages on online platforms
- The protection of privacy
- The need to ensure information security (through the prevention of malicious harking)
- The protection of reputation (to combat issues such as libel, comparative and unlawful advertising) (European Union 1996).
- Protection of the intellectual property

When government carry out censorship through its accredited agencies, expectations at least emerge and additional steps are implemented to stop citizens from bypassing this censorship (Caliskan, 2017). In page 136, Caliskan identified practices encompassing circumvention efforts: Legitimate and illegal usage of privacy tools – where users engage privacy enhanced tools for either legitimate outcomes like providing anonymous tips to law enforcement, completing internet surveys, or illegal, criminal, disruptive, deviant or socially unacceptable purposes like hacking information, identify theft, piracy or even terrorism. The government could engage in disruption of circumvention tools through technical measure – with their superior control of internet infrastructure, the government could deploys technical tools to prevent bypassing by citizens or monitor usage of tools like the Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) techniques. Another way of engaging in disruption of circumvention tools is through legal measures – where the law is invoked to sanction against the use of circumvention tools, or through propaganda – where the government actively instigates fear against any form of bypassing, for example, through promoting public debates on security risks of circumvention tools or other means to influence citizens against accessing these tools.

4. Methodology

Building on the theoretical strength of this study, this thesis explores activist media practice in one aspect and in more general lens, explores circumvention as a media culture. Culture in this context derives meaning from Kenneth Allen's idea of culture as a symbolic reference system whereby humans manufacture and reproduce meaningful, real world in action and interaction (Allan, 1998). Circumvention in many ways are lived experiences, stemming on need, character or reactions to given circumstances. Internet censorship circumvention practices are embraced to satisfy diverse needs, are peculiar to diverse environments and situations and more importantly are influenced by a number of factors which all can be rightly ascertained and categorized through a mixed-methods approach. Hence, this thesis adopted a combination of two research methods – quantitative and qualitative research. This chapter discusses the qualitative and quantitative approaches employed in this thesis, establishing their relevance and compliment to each other as research methods that best provides analysis for the study. An extensive description of the study design is also achieved here highlighting further the study population and overview of sampling possibilities that was considered and adopted. The procedure for conducting the data collection is also explained in this chapter, and importantly, the data collection instruments are discussed while establishing limitations of the research design.

4.1 Study Design

The overall strategy adopted in designing this study stems from the research problem identified. As a research that merges study on experiences with a fact-finding mission on material usage of circumvention tools, survey and interviews were chosen as the most resourceful materials for data collection. This is extensively discussed below (Section 4.1.1 and section 4.2). This study aims at providing information in respect to variables and conditions obtainable in the internet space in Nigeria in the context of censorship, circumvention and activism, and extending recommendations from such situation other democracies around the world. Nigeria's internet usage and population is large, with about half of the country – 108.75 million internet users (*Digital 2022*, n.d.) which is projected to grow to 143.26 million internet users in 2026 and ranked top of the list of African countries based on share of internet traffic through mobile (*Statista*, n.d.). It will be a difficult task

to sample the whole population and produce reliable data for this work, therefore, two important cities were selected for this research. This is not a random selection, Lagos and Abuja are strategy locations, the former being the largest city in Nigeria and the latter being the federal capital territory. Lagos stands significant to this research as the city with the highest number of Voice and Internet subscribers recording about 24.88 million voice and 18.94 million internet subscribers during the year 2020 (Onaleye, 2021). Abuja on the other hand is significant for being the seat of government power and tops the list as the state with a total subscriber base of 9.01 million, which is the highest for a single state in the North-Central region of the country (Onaleye, 2021). Hence, the reason behind choosing Lagos and Abuja as areas of concentration for data collection.

4.1.1 Approaches to Quantitative and Qualitative Research

The choice between conducting a research through either a quantitative method or qualitative or even the both is determined by a lot of factors, especially the research questions in review. While quantitative method relies on numbers or quantity categorization, qualitative fits other methods that does not. This however is not an absolute case as there are situations in which experiences are interpreted through numbers while using qualitative method. In fact, but research methods are complimentary, for example, both focus groups and surveys involve verbal data and can be labeled as qualitative while data from both sources can be analyzed statistically (Sandelowski, 2003). Uwalaka (2017) outlined the traditional divide that existed between quantitative and qualitative researchers. These divides are consequent of inherent differences between the two methods – while the quantitative researchers focused on results from large datasets, qualitative researchers on the other hand focused on the little moments in stories of research subjects. “The quantitative approach was thought to offer a unique macro-perspective of the trends occurring in the world. By comparison, the qualitative approach offered a micro-perspective, which was seen as having the skill to portray the everyday realities of the world and of individuals” (p. 83). He went further to establish that the quantitative research paradigm is a consequent of the normative model which is aligned with mathematical analysis. On the other hand, “qualitative approach adheres to an interpretivist paradigm and the aim is to comprehend the world of human experience from a subjective perspective” (p. 86).

Combining the two research paradigms – qualitative and quantitative approaches, while it can be to appeal to validity, can pose a challenge in evaluation of its merits (Sandelowski, 2003). This does not negate the belief that in the value of research, the mixed method is rather complementary to each other – “Mixed methods research refers to studies which integrate components of qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to improve the understanding of a phenomenon of interest and corroborate the findings” (Uwalaka, 2017, p. 86). An important advantage also highlighted by Uwalaka is that researchers using this method are not confined to any single paradigm as far as their eventual combination addresses their research questions and ensures elaboration and corroboration. The choices of a survey and an interview stems from the need to adequately provide satisfactory empirical data that can attempt to answer the research questions. While the multiple data sources help validate the conclusions drawn from the analysis, it allows the presentation of solid evidence in this case. The quantitative data helps in learning the varieties of circumvention practices and enabling platforms generally adopted by the Nigerian twitter users, or particularly adopted during the 222 days of the Twitter platform lockdown. As a complementary data, this gives the interviews conducted substance in evaluating the experiences of these twitter users and establishing differences as regards to the kind of circumvention practice adopted versus the other individual experiences as regards internet censorship. An important limitation of the use of one method in this study is evident in the study scope and reach. To reliably make a conclusion through a quantitative survey design, a larger scope must be covered and randomized sampling procedure adopted. However, this is not the case, as just few individuals as compared to the study population is reached for this project. To complement the results, the interviews (qualitative study) builds on the information from the surveys to analyze the cultural elements and interaction with circumvention practices among the participants. For example, some survey questions like “Do you feel the banning of Twitter in Nigeria had an impact on you in any way?” to examine the impact of Twitter ban on Nigerians or the relationship/reaction between citizens usage of Twitter/internet and everyday living could not be satisfied using a survey. This is because this variable does not explain further the meanings and experiences behind a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as it uses the binary numbers of ‘1 or 0’.

Interviews preceded the survey, and this is primarily because the survey research to a significant extent informed the questions and data collection strategy adopted for the interview. The qualitative study undertaken mainly served as to provide backbone to the direction initiated by the

responses collated from the quantitative study. This design is referred to as QUAN → QUAL multimethod design where the arrow (→) indicates direction of usage while the uppercase represents dominance and lower case supplementary (Morse, 2003).

4.2 Materials and Data Collection

4.2.1 Survey

The first step of data collection is the development of 17 questions that surveys the general and broad overview of people experiences as regards to internet censorship, internet censorship circumvention and digital activism. These questions were registered in a Google form prepared to answer or at least attempt providing a direction towards answering the research questions. The first part of the questionnaire enquired on the demographic variables while the rest asked detailed questions that drove responses directed at the research objective.

Sampling:

Out of the 32.90 million social media users in Nigeria as at January 2022, which is equivalent to 15.4% of the total population, Twitter's advertising resources indicate that Twitter had 325.4 thousand users in early 2022 which translates to 0.3% of the total population ad reach (*Digital 2022*, n.d.). The study population in this case is about 325,400 Twitter users in Nigeria. To achieve our sample, I adopted a purposeful sampling design otherwise known as judgmental sampling. This design follows a judgmental or arbitrary ideas of the researcher seeking for a specified representation in the sample, or where the researcher is explicitly seeking for diversity (Vehovar et al., 2016). The first step in this sampling is to decide to focus the study on Lagos and Abuja, and as explained earlier (section 4.1), these regions represent a vast majority of Twitter users in Nigeria. Also, from the significant history of activism surrounding the banning of Twitter, particularly the #EndSARS campaign, Lagos and Abuja were central activist locations and mobilization focus among digital activists. Since this quantitative study do not care about equitable representation of the population, as the purpose lies on understanding an overview of practices of circumvention in relation to internet censorship and digital activism, a significant consideration was rather focused on purposeful selection of sample participants. First consideration is: what groups are active Twitter users? The following considerations are how tech savvy these groups

are, and how politically conscious are they? I identified online closed groups that satisfy these audience types, ranging from lawyers to politicians to developers and ICT experts down to activists who are residents in Lagos and Abuja. The conclusive chosen groups were closed groups on WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook. In these groups, the survey was shared and members were encouraged to complete the questions as accurate as possible. Web survey usage in this study is natural to the targeted audience who are mainly active users of internet platforms. Also the need for anonymity, ease and fast collation of data also aided the decision to use Web surveys. In the introductory part of the Web survey, the instruction text emphasized that the data collected is managed under European legislation for data protection (GDPR) and assured participants of their anonymity.

Before directly engaging these groups on WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook social media platforms, a survey pretesting was carried out as a form of product testing prior to the start of actual production fielding of the survey. Pretesting targets the questionnaire instrument and components of survey administration like advance materials, respondent selection procedures, interviewing procedures and operational features, and it helps to detect problems, possible disjoints in questionnaire before the actual distribution of survey (Willis, 2016). In this case, three participants who checks the expected persona of the research audience were selected for pretesting. A particular attention on duration, clarity of questions and respondent willingness to complete the survey led to minor adjustments to the final questionnaire and presentation format. Meanwhile, participants were encouraged to contact me in any case of need for further clarification, and importantly, anonymity of respondents were assured.

The questionnaire distributed contained 17 mixed questions, which took about 10 minutes to complete. While many of the questions were presented using a dichotomous (yes/no) answers, some others provided abundant options while many others were open ended, for example: “Did you use another social media outlet during the ban? (If yes, which?)” to allow the respondent to express their experiences as much as possible. A total of 70 respondents took part in the survey which lasted for 1 month – February 2022. 40 respondents (57.1% of total respondents) identity as male while the remaining 30 (42.9%) were females. Majority of the participants totaling 52 (74.3%) are between the ages of 26 – 41 years and this is followed by 16 – 25 year olds who make up 22.9% of the total number of respondents. While it may be difficult to rightly conclude on the

representativeness of the sample of this study, the ages represented here is consistent with the established ages of the internet population/users in Nigeria.

Table 1: Demographic Representation of Survey Respondents

Description	Response	Frequency
Age	16 – 25 years	16 (22.9%)
	26 – 41 years	52 (74.3%)
	42 – 57 years	2 (2.9%)
	58 – 67 years	0
Gender	Female	30 (42.9%)
	Male	40 (57.1%)
Education Level	No schooling completed	0
	Primary school	0
	High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent	5 (7.1%)
	Trade/technical/vocational training	0
	Bachelor's degree	47 (67.1%)
	Master's degree	18 (25.7%)
	Doctorate degree	0

4.2.2 Interviews

To successfully grasp and explore the Twitter ban in Nigeria, analyze and develop a pattern in the circumvention practices that follow, qualitative interview with 20 Twitter users in Nigeria is used as a primary source of data and empirical stand to make conclusions. According to Pickering (2008, p. 26): “attending to experience in cultural studies research, as in any other field of the human sciences, involves gathering materials about social lives and other cultural mappings of the social world. Any speaking of self or from the perspective given to us by our locations and cultural mappings has to be balanced by listening to others and investigating the matrix of experience

which they speak of themselves.” Qualitative research experts argue that there is no straightforward answer to the question of ‘how many’ and that sample size is contingent on a number of factors relating to epistemological, methodological and practical issues (Vasileiou et al., 2018). The number of interviewees was arrived at considering that quality within the sample size is more important than the quantity of the sample size. When selecting which candidates to use in the sample, researchers can use a variety of sampling methods. Primary sampling methods include random sampling – a stratified sampling method – where individuals are chosen based on shared characteristics; an area sampling, where individuals are selected according to specific locations, or quota sampling, where individuals are chosen out of specific subgroups (Price, 2021). For the purpose of this work however, diversity was key – a selection that ensured inclusiveness was adopted. Just like was adopted for the quantitative survey, a purposeful sampling design was used to arrive at the selection of interviewees. Participants were made up of 13 males and 7 females, aged between 18 to 40 and representing professionals from different endeavours. These professionals include 2 tech professionals, 2 social media influencers, 2 journalists, 2 political office holders, 2 non-political office holding politicians, 2 civil servants, 2 lawyers, 3 diplomats and 3 activists. Each of this category of interviewees were selected because of their significant positions or expert knowledge towards the topic of discussion. The tech professionals contributed to an analysis of internet censorship, circumvention and digital activism from the point of technology and technical capabilities. Their experiences as it revolves the place of technology during the platform lockdown was very critical contribution to the research. Likewise, social media influencers, journalists, politicians and civil servants provided a broader perspective and narration of their experiences that relates well to everyday usage and interaction with the media, media practices and technology. In the case of diplomats, they became important part of the process as their input helped clarify the role of foreign diplomats who though they lived within the physical territory of the Nigerian space, may not be subjected to Nigerian laws and pronouncements including the Twitter ban. This also gave us insight into the experiences of foreigners within the Nigerian space who were likely caught between obeying the pronouncements of the President of the land or circumventing in the name of foreigners. Activists, another important interviewees in this research work aside sharing their activist journey prior and during the Twitter ban in Nigeria providing responses that provided a deep insight into democracy and the mix of technology for governance.

A one-on-one indepth interview style was adopted. While a focus group interview could be argued to have possible qualities of eliciting a great conversation, with consideration to moral implications in this research, it would not serve positively for this study. Participants together might be less motivated to share their experiences and even more importantly, react to the political situation of the country or their activism engagements as the case may be. In view of this, conducting a one-to-one interview though challenging, was the best means of collecting a most reliable data. An open-ended interview method was used to allow participants to direct the conversation and express their experiences and concerns in an in-depth manner. Although a list of questions guided the entire process, the interviewees had a liberty to respond to these questions in any way they deemed excellent. These participants are politically and socially informed, and knowledgeable to discuss and produce meaningful discourse on their experiences with circumventing Twitter ban in Nigeria while commenting on the political complexities of banning Twitter in a democracy through an executive order. Each of the interview lasted for about 15-45minutes and the participants were free to answer, as they deemed comfortable. All the interviews were conducted in March 2022. These interviews were carried out either through Zoom meeting or by my physical visit to the work place, embassies and agreed location of the interviewee.

Analysis of the interview include an interpretative effort to summarize the responses from them. To achieve an efficient data analysis, this project adopted an inductive thematic analysis which involves encoding information to organize the data to identify and develop themes from them (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The first step was to develop a template or a codebook as means of organizing text for subsequent interpretation and testing the reliability of the established codes. The recording of the interviews were listened to several times to aid the coding. The data is subsequently used throughout the research to identify and conclude the circumvention practices adopted by Nigerians and a cultural pattern therein in the larger discourse of war against internet censorship. In the area of ethical consideration or moral implication, the interviewees are presented as anonymous. This is important especially in the context of activism or rebellious engagement of citizens against the Twitter ban in Nigeria. Also, since these interviews were recorded either on Zoom or through the use of a recording app, I ensured that the interviewees were comfortable to speak on record, and assured them of their anonymity. A review of the responses show a high level of consistency and similarity between answers of the interviewees despite being engaged in the interview on different places and different days and with no trace of having knowledge of each

other. This supports the reliability and validity of the answers provided, despite possible limitations of individual biasness that may exist. Also, the open-ended opportunity allows the interviewees to direct the interview responses to their choice themes as far as they are within the frame of the question's subject.

To summarize my engagement with the interview process, I adopted Kvale's (2007) seven stages of an interview inquiry. The seven stages involves formulating the purpose of an investigation and the conception of the theme to be investigated; planning the design of the study with consideration of other stages of investigation and taking into account the moral implications of the study; the practical interviews using an interview guide; preparing the interview material for analysis, and eventual analysis. The sixth stage involves verifying to ascertain the validity, reliability and generalizability of the interview findings while reporting or communication of the findings stand as last stage.

4.3 Limitations

The use of a mixed method (quantitative and qualitative methods) in this research stands as a strength towards reliability, validity, generalizability of the findings. However, every research design in some way comes with its own limitations, and that exactly is the case with the design adopted in this research. The foremost limitation is that this research although arguably timely, is carried out after the primary case study – Twitter ban in Nigeria has been carried out and people moved on over the incident. While all the participants seem to clearly remember their experiences during the Twitter ban and even prior to the ban, it is realistic to assume that their discussion of these experiences could have been more passionate if the research was conducted during the period of the ban. More significant limitations can be seen in the sampling – 70 respondents participated in the survey and a total of 20 interviewees, this is out of a large sample size/study population of about 325,400 persons. The purposeful sampling technique used to arrive at these eventual number of participants cannot be presented as an actual representation of the entire population, and this in itself is a limitation. While purposeful sampling helps ensure a diverse and deliberate mix of participants relevant to the research interest, it may not exactly represent the entire study population. In same vein, the choice of only two states – Lagos and Abuja out of the 36 states in Nigeria do not satisfy a general representation of the Nigerian population.

Sequential design, which is the structured process the mixed methods adopted in this research undoubtedly provides possibility of unveiling unexpected themes. But, like it is in other forms of designs, a disadvantage is that there may be the loss of depth and flexibility that occurs when qualitative data are quantitized, especially when considered that the analytic process of combining qualitative and survey data by quantitizing qualitative data can be time consuming and expensive (Driscoll et al., 2007).

5. Analysis

Circumvention practices are being embedded into everyday practices in response to internet censorship measures adopted by governments. This chapter presents analysis of the Nigerian Twitter ban and the assumptions of circumvention being a form of digital activism or activism practice while is rapidly growing into a cultural element in the democracy and internet discourse. The findings from the survey is analyzed alongside the responses from the interviews to ensure a comparable outcome that strengthens reliability of the conclusion. Each of the research questions are analyzed, followed by a discussion of the findings. This chapter is necessary to bring out the result of the research work done and enable interpretations to be made on the data collected and conclusion drawn based on it.

The chapter has three (3) parts. The first part presents the analysis of quantitative data gotten from survey collected and an attempt at answering the research question that specifically quantifies circumvention in terms of variety of practices adopted. The second part of the chapter presents the results of the qualitative data with a detailed analysis of the experiences of participants established through the interviews. The third and last part of the chapter presents an integrated result from the two methods of empirical analysis engaged, that is, both the quantitative and qualitative data outcomes. The main interview themes are critically analyzed and compared with the outcome from the survey, drawing out obvious patterns which is vital to present a focused discussion of results and reaching eventual conclusion.

5.1 Quantitative Outcome

With the provided Google form's statistical summary of the recorded responses collated through the survey, there was no further need to engage the use of statistical methods in other statistical packages or software to analyze this quantitative phase. The descriptive statistics responds to the research questions: What circumvention practices are embraced in response to censorship? And, what are the implication of circumvention practices? To understand the outcome of the quantitative survey and put it into context with circumvention of internet censorship, it is relevant to present three phases of the quantitative data. The first phase is the existing behavior on Twitter usage prior

and after the ban, the second phase is a description of the variety of circumvention practices and the third phase is the implications.

5.1.1 Twitter Usage

Though this survey does not aim to use its data to generalize on situations like Twitter usage across Nigeria or round the world, having in mind that a purposeful small study scope has been focused on to derive these data. However, it is fascinating to note that the responses agree with existing research in this area. From the survey, we see that most of the respondents were old users of Twitter, over 1 year before the ban (81.4%). Majority of the respondents spend 1 – 3 hours a day on the platform (84.3%) while a significant number (in this context), the remaining 15.7% spend about 4 – 9 hours daily on Twitter. As regards what these respondents use Twitter for, a majority of 37.1% use the platform for entertainment while a close mark of 32.9% say they use Twitter for education. While 10% of these respondents agree to using Twitter for business, a combined statistics of 20% use the platform for all of the mentioned options (entertainment, education and business) and others like for politics and for information/news. Further analysis of the quantitative data shows that after the ban of Twitter in Nigeria, 74.3% of the respondents kept on using the platform, and this is despite the ban or inability to access Twitter website through the Nigerian internet infrastructure. On the reasons why these participants kept on with their Twitter usage, majority maintained that Twitter was their main source of entertainment (56.7%). This is closely followed by participants who used the platform for education (48.3%). The following highest number of participants registered that they progressed in their usage of Twitter to spite the government in a form of digital activism or protest. This group is represented at 31.7% and this was closely followed by participants who continued Twitter usage for business (28.3%). The survey in this enquiry had requested that participants choose all the options that apply to their experience, and about 8.3% listed other reasons why they used Twitter despite the ban to include information, communication, socialization and community. Also, 5.1% claimed that the Twitter ban do not apply to them, and therefore they continued to use the platform for a combination of reasons. The respondents were also asked (for those who avoided the use of Twitter all through the ban or for sometime within the ban period) the reason for not using Twitter. Among the 49 recorded responses, 36.7% simply couldn't access Twitter, and of course avoided using the platform all through or for some time during the ban. Interestingly, 8.2% of the respondents avoided using Twitter to obey the government authority. This does not confirm if they were in

agreement with the banning of Twitter or not, however it is a pointer that they recognized the jurisdiction and authority or prerogative of the government to ban Twitter.

See table below.

Table 2: Twitter Usage of 70 respondents

Description	Response	Frequency
Twitter usage since joining the platform	For 1 year or more	57 (81.4%)
	For 3 – 12 months	6 (8.6%)
	For less than 3 months	7 (10%)
Reason for Twitter usage	Entertainment	26 (37.1%)
	Education	23 (32.9%)
	Business	7 (10%)
	Other (information, communication, socialization, community building and all of the above)	14 (20%)
Daily usage	1 – 3 hours	59 (84.3%)
	4 – 9 hours	11 (15.7%)
	10 – 13 hours	0
	More than 13 hours	0
Twitter usage during ban	Yes	52 (74.3%)
	No	18 (25.7%)
Reason for Twitter usage during ban (60 respondents – multiple options)	Entertainment	34 (56.7%)
	Education	29 (48.3%)
	Business	17 (28.3%)
	As a form of protest against the government	19 (31.7%)
	Other (information, communication, socialization,	14 (23.6%)

	community building and those not affected by the ban)	
Reason for avoidance of Twitter usage during ban (49 respondents)	To obey the government	4 (8.2%)
	I could not access Twitter	18 (36.7%)
	Other (No comment and occasional use of Twitter)	27 (55.1%)

5.1.2 Impact of Internet Censorship

Among the most important question asked survey respondents was on the impact of the censorship circumstance experienced. In general response to whether the respondents experienced any impact of the ban of Twitter, 68.6% acknowledged such impact while 31.4% maintained that the ban had no impact on them. To give context to the concerns on impact of internet censorship, especially on a platform like Twitter, a list of established reasons why people may use social media was provided for the respondents to identify most associated with the impact experienced. As shown in *Figure 4*, 40% of the respondents are impacted on their engagement and access to entertainment, education and business on Twitter collectively. Specifically on entertainment, 17.1% says they feel deprived. For education, 8.6% and for business, only 4.3% felt deprived of any opportunity through Twitter ban.

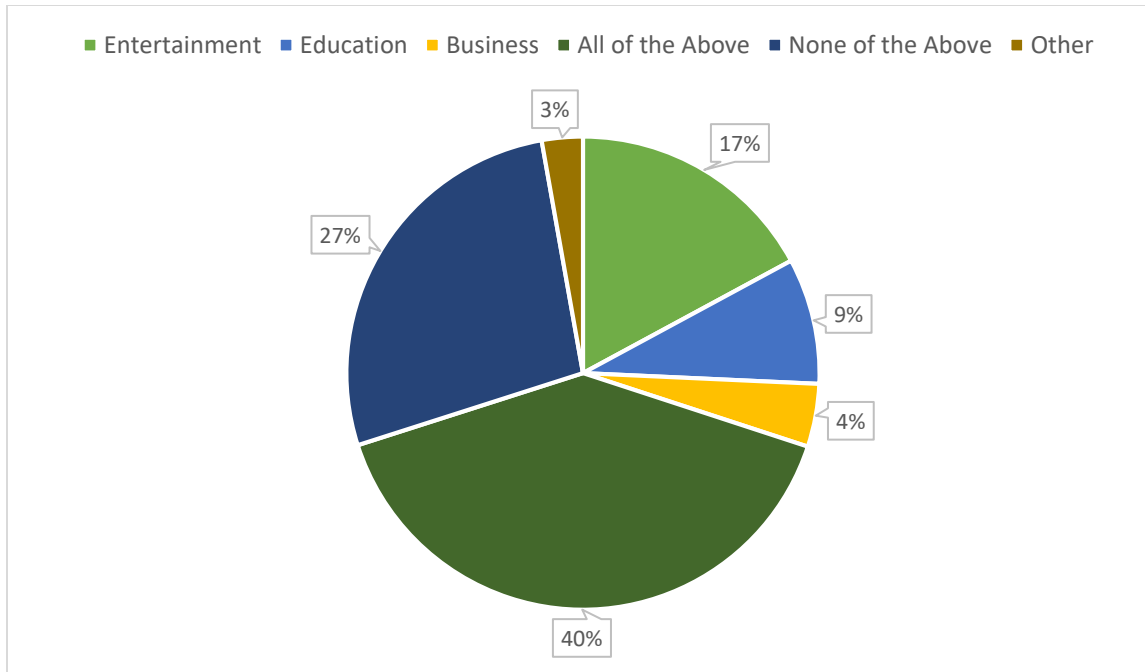


Figure 4: How Twitter ban deprived respondents of outlined activities

5.1.3 Circumvention Practices

When breaking down answers to see what kinds of circumvention practices respondents adopted to overcome the Twitter ban in Nigeria, it became apparent that the largest group were users or subscribers of one type of technology service or the other that facilitated circumvention. This aspect of enquiry in the survey was captured by posing two questions on how they (respondents) directly circumvented the ban and whether they used other social media platforms during the ban period. Interestingly, the two most significant groups are those who used Twitter during the ban through technology and those who avoided using the platform during the ban. The former is represented at 60% while the latter is at 28.6%. This result establishes that among the adopted circumvention practices, the majority engaged circumvention by using VPNs, proxy networks and encryption technologies, while the following largest group circumvented by avoiding the use of the platform. The next largest group aside these two are those respondents who circumvented by jumping to alternative social media platforms. This group is at 4.3%, and in the question on which social media alternatives were used during the ban, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and LinkedIn topped the chart. YouTube, Telegram and Snapchat were also mentioned by a few of the respondents as alternative platforms embraced, mostly by a combination of these social media platforms. It is important to mention that the survey shows that some other respondents were not

willing to share their practices. For example, some choose “Other” explaining the use of Ethernet while some simply wrote “No comment.” The summary of the circumvention is represented in Figure 5.

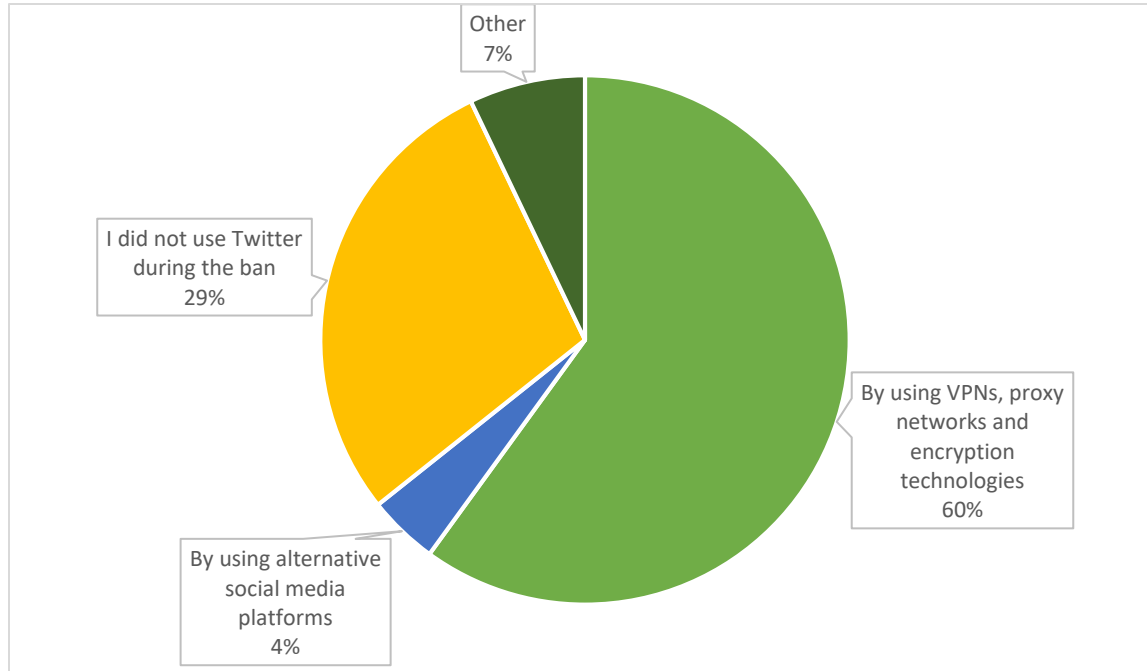


Figure 5: Circumvention practices during Twitter ban in Nigeria

5.1.4 Circumvention as Digital Activism Practice

In Table 2, Twitter usage describing before and during the ban experiences showed that about 31.7% of the respondents used Twitter during the ban as a form of protest against the government. This is a significant group, and enquiries on political indication and implication of the ban to elicit responses in this context witnessed a complimenting data. 77.1% of the respondents maintained that Twitter ban was their first experience of internet censorship or any form of restriction by the government in Nigeria.

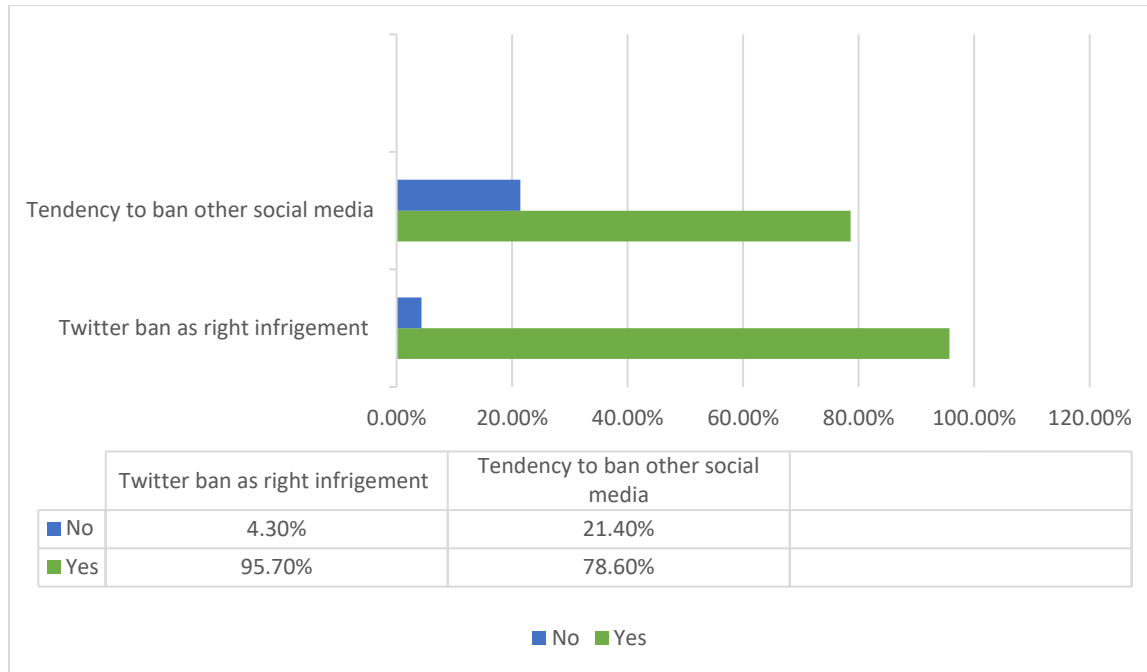


Figure 6: Response chart on rights and censorship

As seen in figure 6 above, almost all the respondents (exception of 4.30%) think that the Twitter ban by the Nigerian government is an infringement of the fundamental human rights of expression enshrined in the Nigerian constitution. An activism prompting perspective shows that a large number of these respondents (78.6%) further think that the Twitter ban is first among more bans targeted at the internet/media.

5.2 Qualitative Outcome and Integrated Result

This is the analysis and presentation of results from the in-depth interviews engaged with 20 respondents bordering on circumvention culture, digital activism and internet censorship. The results here are not presented in isolation, but rather a combination of the results captured through the quantitative surveys. This integrated results base on the themes and concepts captured from both survey responses and interview responses, drawing these themes majorly from the interview responses, which serves as primary data, for this study and comparing with the quantitative outcome. This analysis is categorized under three sub-headings: Technology, self-censorship and Platform jumping. Incorporating the experiences captured through quantitative data is essential for

a strengthened analysis of this subject and each of the sub-headings reviews the results general practices of circumvention and activism. In Technology, the study presents behavior, reactions elicited and consequent relationship of interviewees with technology during and after Twitter ban in Nigeria. By focusing on the impact of internet censorship to understand the existing relationship before the ban, the study revealed technology as central, and an enhanced cultural influence. Additionally, technology aided engagements were the most popular circumvention practices and a symbolic reaction to censorship response. Under self-censorship the study explored the connection between withdrawal and circumvention. Is withdrawing from the social media space a form of circumvention? On the last part, platform jumping, a focus on restriction or censorship experiences outside social media was established. Interviewees narrated their experiences and rational for digital activism, and ensuing discussion on platform jumping as a form of circumvention practice.

5.2.1 Technology

The findings of this study show that internet censorship viewed from any perspective has impact on the citizenry. What this impact could mean to the nation or even what exact impact this means differs from audience to audience. All the categories of participants in the interview at some point where asked if the Nigerian Twitter ban had any impact in their daily engagements. A greater number of the participants acknowledged a form of impact, and extends this impact to represent the heavy technology culture among the interviewees in Nigeria. It is important to highlight that all the interviewees were active Twitter users and at least has basic technology knowledge generally. Also, while some participants are technology experts, the rest represent the greater Nigerian population with basic knowledge. A significant evaluation of the impact by the participants is determined by their level of technological involvement with both Twitter and other aspects of their daily living. Another important indication is the political ideology of the participant in question. For Ben, a diplomat with one of the foreign embassies in Abuja Nigeria (*all names of interviewees have been changed to ensure anonymity*), the political position of their country on the Twitter ban in Nigeria influenced their perspective on the impact of the ban as regarding their engagements.

“Because our audience are primarily Nigerians, and we strive to communicate the embassy priorities to Nigerians first in addition to our followers outside Nigeria who find our content interesting and relevant, inaccessibility caused by some sort of censorship clearly has an impact.”

– Ben, diplomat

When asked if there was an impact of Twitter ban on engagements, this interviewee exclaimed, “Why not!”

“...I’m on Twitter and therefore if it’s not longer available, definitely it has a direct impact on my activities. Twitter has been a medium of communication, not just between individuals but also between the citizens and the government and between institutions. If such a medium that has been very helpful in communicating with government and institutions and citizens is no longer there, then it suddenly means that there is a gap.” – Dera, youth advocate

For Emeka, an ICT expert also acknowledging the impact of Twitter ban focused on implications on business relationships and engagements.

“Part of what we do is also to use our Twitter handle to promote business and what we do. If you take that away, you are hindering progress. It is affecting our business directly and indirectly. There are clients and potential clients who we can’t reach out aside Twitter. So how do you ban it and think it won’t affect business?” – Emeka, ICT expert

In same line of business importance, Femi, an accountant explained that the ban is a limitation to the otherwise education and opportunities information on Twitter could provide for his field of work: *“This is an avenue to share knowledge. I follow some accounts that post knowledgeable things about my field of work – this is one of the most important things I do on Twitter. Some accounts I follow talks about venture capital, things on accounting standards and main practices on accounting. Personally, I socialize on Twitter as well, and banning of Twitter made it impossible to express our views. The ban has affected us by stopping some of us from sharing our view, making it impossible for us to learn things about crypto and things about the new norms in accounting.”*

One of the interviewees introduced an important perspective on the impact of Twitter censorship. When asked if Twitter ban had any impact, this is his response:

“Well, when it comes to accessing Twitter, I see no impact on me from the ban. We have a major solution where we use the VPN to access Twitter. Therefore, I can’t really say that there’s any impact on me as I can still access the platform through VPN. But speaking about human rights this is where we can say that there is an impact. This government does not care about our civic rights, and this can even have an impact on our mental health.” – Olu, Content Creator

Olu’s response elicits a different understanding of impact and a perspective that measures what is and is not impactful to his situation. The key word in this testimony is VPN, a technological tool for circumvention which according to him, eliminates possibility of enduring any form of impact. This tool is an important technological culture that follows censorship, as it serves as a major tool to coping with internet censorship. This is also reflected by [Bozdag \(2016\)](#), describing the political situation in Turkey as encouraging a full embrace of circumvention tools like VPN for everyday use. While users in Turkey during the Twitter ban in 2014 initially preferred alternative and free DNS providers such as Google DNS and OpenDNS, VPN soon took over the conversation and became a circumvention culture after the blocking of DNS.

A discussion with the interviewees shows that many of them used Twitter and at least tried to engage the platform through using VPNs, proxy networks and encryption technologies. This corresponds with the outcome of the survey as seen in *Figure 4* and further illustrates a suggestion that circumvention practices are facilitated mainly through technology.

“Twitter ban impact on me is on the negative side of the spectrum. I’m not very active on social media aside Twitter. At some point I had to limit my social media use to Twitter. I left Instagram because of my mental health, and I left Facebook since I was not gaining anything there. I saw Twitter as an educational platform where you can tailor your content of interest way in the sense that I can follow specific people in specific industry that brings me the information I need. On Twitter, you can follow who aligns with your content need and can unfollow those who only share information you don’t want to have. Twitter gave me a kind of control over the content that comes my. But during the ban, every Nigerian I know on Twitter had to switch to using VPN. But personally, that is a lot for work. Each time you have to go on Twitter, you have to switch on the VPN and if you want to use my mobile apps, you have to switch it off. For someone like me who

has crypto wallets, I have to switch off and on, and after some time I got tired and abandoned it. To be very frank, it impacted my access to information. It really affected me. You know Twitter is a microblogging site where information is there on the go, as it is happening, you are feeding on it. But since then...” Sam, Journalist.

“I used Twitter after the ban. As soon as the ban happened, everyone I know downloaded VPN. I think it was a case where the only people who abided by the ban were government supporters. You hear people say that Twitter content was less toxic due to the absence of these people. Civil society organizations, churches and many other notable institutions released statements against the Twitter ban and progressed in their use of VPN for business as usual.” – Chinyere, Lawyer

Among the interviewees, there was a significant activist sentiment where there is an acceptance that the government was at fault, and the banning of Twitter being a wrong and unacceptable move by the government. The connection between infringement of the right to the freedom of expression or the perception of a bridge to this right and the embrace of technology as a solution to censorship is seen through the experiences of the interviewees who shared stories of their journey to using VPN.

Nike and Raymond, among other interviews voiced their activist consideration of the use of Twitter during the ban.

“Cutting off from Twitter is like being left in the dark. I had to use Twitter through VPN. I used Twitter during the ban because personally, I think the reason for the ban is not justifiable and the government is not following the rule of law. I am taking a cue from the government, since they don’t show a good example, I continued using the app. If the platform was wrong, I would have been patriotic by stopping Twitter use, but the reason for the ban is just propaganda.” – Nike, ICT expert

“There is conflict and disagreement at the top hierarchy of the government. The presidency do not follow stipulated rules. Why should we as the citizens follow what the government says, why should we succumb to what they say? I used VPN to access Twitter, and this our own way of showing that

we don't support the banning of Twitter. We can't protest on the streets so that killings will not happen, the use of VPN to access Twitter is in fact a form of protest for me.”- Ibrahim, Politician

In line with the above reflections and other numerous responses recorded, the adoption of technology as a circumvention practice aligns with the interviewees' consideration of Twitter ban as an infringement on their rights. When asked if they consider Twitter ban as an infringement on freedom of expression, a significant number of the interviewees answered in affirmative. This is in agreement with the outcome from the quantitative survey (See figure 5), they maintained that the technology of circumvention provided options to fight Twitter ban. The role of VPN as a circumvention tool is central all over the world as the go-to channel for a technological solution to censorship. Following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the Russian internet became progressively more controlled. Instagram and Facebook were blocked while Twitter was heavily restricted. Just like citizens of Nigeria who heavily relied on VPN technology to circumvent Twitter ban, Russians adopted VPN (Kharpal, 2022): “The top 10 VPN apps in Apple's App Store and Google Play Store in Russia collectively saw nearly 6 million downloads between Feb. 24, the day the invasion began, to March 8, according to data from SensorTower compiled for CNBC. This was up 1,500% when compared with the top 10 VPN apps in the previous 13-day period.” It is necessary to mention that internet censorship is not strange in Russia. According to *Freedom on the Net* (2021, n.d.), the Russian government in November 2019 passed the sovereign internet law, led by President Putin to rewire the Russian web domains, separating from the broader global internet while also threatening to block VPN services.

VPN use as a circumvention practice is seemingly not just to claim the rights of expression, but a cultural embrace to bypass censorship. One of the interviewees narrated her journey to this embrace:

“I get vital information from Twitter. Before I see it on TV, I must have already seen it on Twitter. For business also, the negative impact of the Twitter ban is many. Despite these thoughts, I don't agree that the banning of Twitter is an infringement on my right. It is important to mention that the government also has its own rights to determine which company should operate in Nigeria. I downloaded VPN after the ban, and this is what I use to access Twitter. I use VPN because I don't watch news on TV or buy newspapers. I get all my information from Twitter, it is a place where things trend, and instead of just going through online papers one after the other, I simply go to

what is trending to know what's happening in Nigeria. VPN is the only way I know to access any content in the internet in a case of restriction. Although this is the first time I am experiencing this sort of ban, I think it will continue and I have left the VPN app for my everyday use in any case of internet delay.” – Anna, Civil servant

Zittrain (et al., 2017) describe two trends that diminish governments' ability to achieve censorship: the increasing migration of content and communication to centralized platforms and apps, and the expanding use of encrypted connections by websites and platforms. The platform blocking efforts by democratic governments provide strong incentive for citizens to incorporate VPN apps and other technological tools and solutions as part of their everyday internet tools. These tools offer safe haven, ensuring access and continuous use of blocked platform to resist the incursions from state and non-state actors promoting censorship. As an activist media practice, technology is a major enabling force that maintains practice. Strategic communication adoption, here in the form of technology use and conscious risk-driven use of Twitter against a hostile political environment, is a reoccurring engagement by the interviewees who agree that VPN use represented to them, a conscious effort to antagonize the government. Almost immediately after the banning of Twitter in Nigeria, a new trend surfaced – “Thank God for VPN,” as reported by CNN, a form of celebration of this circumvention tool and massive public education on usage (CNN, n.d.).

5.2.2 Self-Censorship

Aside the practice of using technological tools, self-censorship is a significant practice among citizens and engagers of censorship circumvention. Parks & Mukherjee (2017, p. 229) explained that self-censorship can result from “an individual's socialization into a particular political subjectivity or informational culture, or from his/her careful assessment of whether and how to post potentially controversial news or information in online environments.” Another important findings show that self-censorship can be resulted from the incapability to use or access other available circumvention protocols. During the interview with Duru, a content creator who utilizes Twitter to promote his works as well as engage in everyday content as inspired by his preferences, he announced that he self-censored due to the lack of power supply in his area of resident to support use of technology circumvention practices. He explains:

“In so many ways, I have been affected by the Twitter ban. Ordinarily, everyone should be able to access the internet, but with the ban, there is a restriction. For anyone to bypass this restriction, your main option is the VPN. This is my story. I am a videographer who uses these platforms to promote my work, and now I have to rely on VPN to do this. The difficult thing is that VPN drains batteries, and using VPN in a place with no power supply or adequate power supply is a doubled problem. I think this ban was for a reason, basically, the government don’t want people to talk about its shortcomings. It is an infringement of our rights, but to avoid the draining of my battery, I just decided to avoid use of VPN and pause from Twitter.” – Duru, content creator

Despite that Duru understands the technical use of VPN to circumvent, he wouldn’t engage in this practice due to other surrounding environmental limitations. He self-censored, as a circumvention practice. Many other interviewees who engaged in some sort of self-censorship testified to other socio-environmental factors and perception or even experiences that fueled their practices. He is how Matthew, a researcher described his self-censorship experience:

“Twitter used to be my most reliable source on getting information, especially on things that relate to research and special resources for scholarships. I’m a near perfect user of my Twitter feed, and with the ban I went backward information wise. I avoided using VPN, I’m just scared of using it as my phone was almost hacked the last time I tried. I think my mobile was attacked after I installed the VPN. I never tried again as I don’t know where these VPNs comes from or who created it, and with the extended period of the ban, I was not able to use Twitter. I just avoided the platform. Avoiding Twitter is my own way of circumvention.” – Matthew, Researcher

Duru and Matthew’s experiences are two sides of a coin, an unfortunate self-censorship that is not rooted in reaction in support or against government, but for self-preservation. A confirmation that some self-censorship happens rationally to socio-environmental factors beyond control of the self-censored individual.

When self-censorship is linked to partisan political engagement, then it clarifies how some circumvention practices are embedded within cultural practices and state power relations. A clear two socio-political flags in Nigeria include those who self-censored to enjoy acceptance of government’s position and practice solidarity. An interviewee simply said, *“No comment”* to the

enquiry on why they decided to self-censor. That provides no further detail, but background data shows that acknowledgement of state power functions affect user behavior as regards circumvention practice. Shadrach, a politician with the ruling party has this to say:

“Whether you like it or not, it is the prerogative of the government to protect its citizens and ensure civility and obedience to law and order. Twitter as at then was becoming a tool of destabilization in Nigeria, and the government had to ban its engagements. We may not have a country to call our own or nation if the government had overlooked the excesses of Twitter both as a platform or as a communication tool for people fighting hard to destabilize the nation. Remember, a known criminal makes posts unrestricted on Twitter, but when a whole president of the largest black nation in the world made a post threatening the activities of all criminals, Twitter quickly shut the president up. And do not forget what happened during the #EndSARS protests. Have you forgotten? Through Twitter, criminals mobilized themselves to set the country ablaze.” – Shadrach, Politician

Preceding this response, Shadrach mentioned that he never used Twitter again right from the moment the government pronounced officially the banning of the platform. Additionally, he doesn't think it is an infringement to his freedom of speech and expression as he argues that there are numerous alternative platforms available for all to use for their free speech. Remember Matthew? He was scared of being hacked when using VPN and so decided to self-censor. There are other set of scared interviewees who choose to self-censor. Dana is part of these persons:

“First, I thought it was all a joke. Then with everyday passing by, it became realer, and I couldn't access Twitter. After some days, I decided that I needed to find a way to circumvent. Infact, I wanted to use VPN, but when the government announced that they will arrest anyone who defiles the ban and keeps using Twitter, I just decided to forget Twitter. Initially, I thought this ban will last for a few weeks, but 1 month turned to 2, 3, 4 and even more.” – Dana, social media influencer

Mou (et al., 2016)'s effort to understand circumvention tools resulted in a conclusion that with the exception of social trust, macro-social factors have but a modest influence on the use of circumvention tools. Self-censorship on the other, both as a deliberate circumvention strategy or convenient circumvention practice is influenced by micro-individual-level variables like the

perceived technology fluidity. In communicating their self-censorship engagements, interviews have aligned with this results and this explains the diverse reasons and reactions behind self-censorship as a media practice.

5.2.3 Platform Jumping

“Twitter isn’t my best platform, it has never been my major place for fun or online social activities. Although I visited Twitter regularly before it was banned, once I noticed that Twitter was blocked and I wasn’t receiving latest notification, I didn’t bother so much. I reactivated my Instagram and Facebook and satisfactorily used them for my information and entertainment source. I deliberately moved myself to Instagram and I think the best way to circumvent the ban is to move on. And to remind you, it was a crime to use Twitter according to the attorney general of the federation. He said you could get arrested or prosecuted, and I don’t think breaking the law is the right thing to do. You better just move on, and keep yourself out of trouble since there are alternative platforms.”

– Adi, civil servant

Just like self-censorship, platform jumping is often linked to partisan political engagement, and it strengthens these practices as embedded within cultural practices and state power relations. Adi categorically calls a transition from Twitter to Instagram a circumvention move, and an easy route to escaping censorship. She was not the only interviewee on this perspective or action. Ebuka, a student who despite his growing thousands of followership on Twitter did the same, and almost for same reason:

“I used VPN as everyone else, but after the warning by the Attorney General, Malami, I decided to forget Twitter at the moment. I mean, everyone should be afraid. Don’t you remember that after the #EndSARS protest, they arrested some youths at the airport and froze their bank accounts for supporting the protest against the government? This government is capable of anything. I think focusing on my Instagram handle was the best option to circumvent.” – Ebuka, Student/Twitter Influencer

Parks & Mukherjee (2017) defined platform jumping to mean when users tactically shift their practices of sharing and consuming information, as is the case with Adi and Ebuka, from one platform to another. This action facilitates an expansion to access, and emerge within an

intermediate culture where these users are accustomed to such practices. To understand platform jumping, they had proposed an understanding of the term, “platform.” “It could mean a computational infrastructure or hardware that supports games, applications, search engines and mobile phone environments, or digital media intermediaries that connects producers, consumers and advertisers” (Parks & Mukherjee, 2017, p. 225).

When discussing platform jumping, its motive with the interviewees, the word “risk” was reoccurring among these respondents objections. Most of the objections answered why technology like the use of VPN was not a preferred option – explaining the risk factors ‘observed’ in the use of the VPN and the opportunity cost of switching platforms almost instantly. Matthew and Dana who self-censored notably explained their motive to be ‘risk,’ sharing same scenario with “platform jumpers”. However, some of the respondents who jumped platforms particularly established that use of technology to circumvent posed many risks, repeating the concerns of “hacking,” “virus attack” and “stealing of financial data.” Platform jumping Twitter ban for the respondents means avoiding these risks and migrating production and consumption of content on Facebook or Instagram most especially. Additionally, there was a new trend among some of the respondents. This is where platform jumping is coated in political context and in agreement with set loyalist tendencies. Bibs is a politician that identifies with the ruling party, and like Shadrach, she answered that Twitter ban isn’t an infringement in any fundamental rights of Nigerian citizens, but rather an effort to protect the nation from the “destructive efforts of Twitter towards destabilization.” Following the Twitter ban, she switched to a platform called, ‘Koo’ that shares identical similarities, operational and user interface, with Twitter. Koo is a micro-blog established to help Indians express themselves in the easiest way possible with the objective of democratizing their voice, share thoughts in text, audio or video (*Koo*, n.d.). This move is significant because it was one of a prominent and mass migration by government sympathizers during the ban.

As Sadiq puts it in the beginning of his news article: “Barely a week after Nigeria's Government placed an indefinite suspension on the operations of microblogging site, Twitter, the federal government made its debut on an Indian-based social media platform, Koo, which was barely known in Nigeria” (Sadiq, 2021).

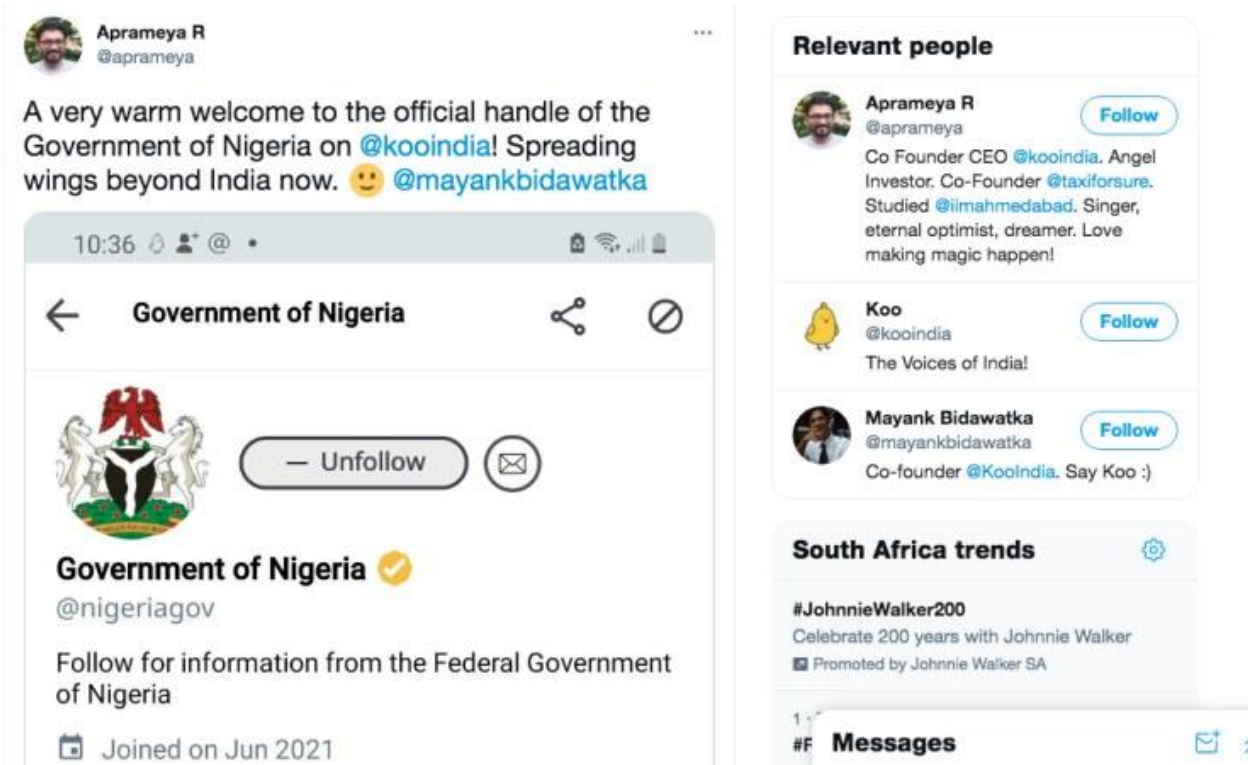


Figure 7: Aprameya Radhakrishna, the Co-founder and CEO of Koo welcomes the Nigerian government to the app (Sadiq, 2021)

Among thousands that joined the app following Twitter ban in Nigeria, prominent names include: President Muhammadu Buhari with a verified handle (@muhammadubuhari) and his Personal Assistant on Digital and New Media, Bashir Ahmad have joined. A Koo handle claiming to be that of the First Lady Aisha Buhari (@A_Buhrari) equally surfaced. Activist and former Senator representing Kaduna Central, Shehu Sani (@Sen.shehuSani) has been active on the platform as well as Kanywood celebrities such as Hadiza Gabon (@Hadiza_Aliyu) and Rahama Sadau (@Rahama).

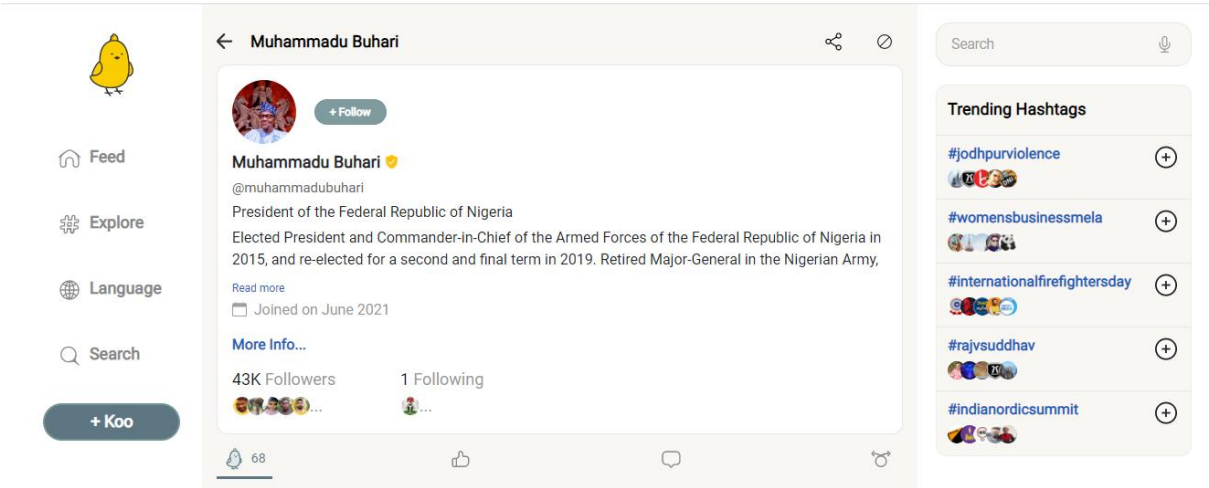


Figure 8: Screenshot of the verified President Buhari's Koo account



Figure 9: Screenshot of the President Buhari's media aide and other Nigerians promoting Koo

Bibs and many other Nigerians, especially those in agreement with the ruling government jumped from Twitter to Koo. This gives a significant shift in the cultural interpretation of platform jumping as an escape from suppressing voices (Parks & Mukherjee, 2017) to the new dimension of platform jumping as an affirmation means to what I refer to as ‘platform disapprobation’.

Aside the aforementioned groups of platform jumpers, diplomats were also significant set of persons who engaged in platform jumping. One of the embassies in defense of their engagement explained the need to honour the host country:

“We do not agree with the ban, but our government saw the need to respect the locally applied rules of our host country. Because of this, we stopped all our communication on Twitter and migrated to other social media platforms. I repeat, this doesn’t mean a form of solidarity to the banning of Twitter... we prefer you see it as an acknowledgement that Nigeria for us is home away from home.” – Benny, Diplomat

Benny’s voice and body language reaffirmed conscious effort to avoid misinterpretation and quotation, and a repetition of “this doesn’t mean a form of solidarity to the banning of Twitter” is to clarify their contradicting position – respect to the government without solidarity to the decision of the government. This presents a dilemmatic situation that censorship poses and the eventual circumvention indecisiveness and behaviour that follows. It also establishes a difference between and among diverse media users as regards practices. Activist media practices and ideas of media use isn’t material outcome in this situation. However, this situation can be argued to be a subtle practice. See the case of Ben, another diplomat who explained that the first response of their embassy was to jump platform, however returning to Twitter to categorically engage in their disagreement with the censorship of the government:

“Our embassy used Twitter, but not at the beginning. I should mention at this stage that we are an embassy in Nigeria, but the way we work, our devices are more or less connected to (our country). Our location is still (our country) even though we are in Nigeria. So in our systems in the office, it is programmed in such a way that the embassy is in (our country), without any VPN, we have standard firewalls and security systems that posit we are in (our country). We had no need to install any secondary technology to access Twitter or circumvent as other persons did. We could still access Twitter and make posts as much as we wanted during the ban. However, due to some staff inability to use their own phones, since all don’t have official phones, there was a limitation

in that end. It is important that I mention that there is also a place of decision and diplomacy and respecting positions made by countries. At the time when the ban came into place, even though we could access Twitter, we didn't first counter the government by using it. We jumped to Instagram and then reached out to our Ministry of Foreign Affairs back in (our capital city) and we had to tell them this is the situation of things, this is what the government has said about this platform, this is the decision they have taken and we wanted to know if it is appropriate we still use Twitter or respect that decision. This took us about a week, slightly more, the back and forth and getting the responses. Finally, we got a nod that we are not under any restriction and can still communication using the platform, as it is with other colleagues. By colleagues, I mean other embassies.” – Ben, diplomat

Ben's concluding statement, “Finally, we got a nod that we are not under any restriction and can still communicate using the platform, as it is with other colleagues. By colleagues, I mean other embassies” points to the existence of collective action as a premise to a supposed media behavior. (Uwalaka, 2017) agrees that those who are not ‘loyal’ to the government are more likely to use the Twitter digital platform, a crucial ramification for the logic of connective action. This is an activist media move.

6. Conclusion

To conclude this study, let us refer to the research concerns and purpose summarized here:

1. To understand what circumvention practices embraced in response to censorship
2. To understand how circumvention practices can be regarded as a form of activism
3. To ascertain the implication of circumvention practices
4. To learn how circumvention practices are becoming a cultural engagement in the fight against censorship.

Expressed through the analysis, participants in this study, both from survey and interview engaged in actions that can be rightly categorized as circumvention, ranging from technology use to self-censorship to platform jumping. Each of these categories stem from different motives and of interest was to understand if any or all of the circumvention practices was a form of activism. While there are thousands of other communication tools and other online applications available for the experience of internet users, circumvention tools, though a fraction of the entire ecosystem of internet tools, carry a deeper social meaning than other channels (Mou et al., 2016). They indeed are tools of cultural engagement, and changes the dynamics in the fight against censorship.

Mattoni & Treré (2014) acknowledged the temporality in social movements and illustrated the evolution and dynamism that comes with such activist practices through its constant interface with other factors of the society, either politically, economically, socially or culturally. Their concepts of media knowledge practices give evidence to the interactions seen between the Nigerian citizenry and their response to Twitter ban – actions and inactions considered as circumvention practices. Particularly, media knowledge predictably and extensively influenced circumvention engagement. Activist practices were mainly at a micro level – individual actors, but attracted attention with its evident mobilization for mass circumvention. Many social media users took responsibility to educate the public on which technology to access, and how to use these technologies for seamless circumvention of the Twitter ban.

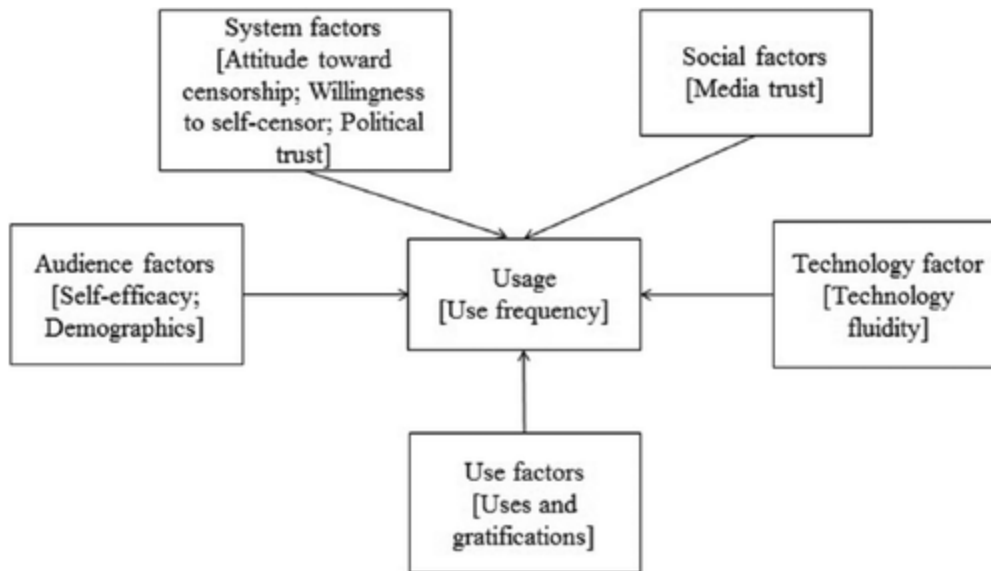


Figure 10: A roadmap for understanding the use of circumvention tools to bypass online censorship (Source: Mou et al., 2016)

The roadmap, as shown in Figure 10, represents the interactions within and surrounding circumvention practices, cultural consequences and user behaviour. It is within this interactive ecosystem that we can see the implications of circumvention practices. As seen from respondent's reactions to implications and how they format themselves in the discussion of risks, circumvention through technology is believed to be an embodiment of personal security and data risks. However, system factors are motivators for activist practices; usage and use factors as well as audience factors fuel the cultural contrast; and technology and social factors play a representative role in the consequences that stem from circumvention (See also: [Lin, 2003](#)). A comparison, especially on the system factors, can be drawn from [Anyanwu & Ibagere's \(2021, pp. 127–129\)](#) factors that influence citizen journalism in Nigeria. They acknowledged that the average Nigerian is:

“inundated with myriad of insecurities and social challenges. He is conscious of the insincerity of governments at all levels so his distrust of government actions and policies is palpable. Arising from this, even the best intentions of government are suspect. His distrust of government at all levels is as a consequence of his daily experiences via his observations of the lifestyles of political office holders which are not salutary. This is because the lifestyles of the politicians and party leaders make citizens to suspect their

claims of sincerity and this distrust cuts across the geographical wind vane of the nation without recourse to ethnic or religious sentiments and rubs off on citizens a belief or rejection of government directives.”

Interactions with activists and respondents who acknowledge that their circumvention engagements stem from activism need to stand against the government embraced their justification from other factors other than censorship, same factors that influence citizen journalism. Here is an excerpt from Anyanwu & Ibagere (2021, pp. 127–129):

“Unemployment: *The average Nigerian is aware that job creation by government is media hype that does not translate to reality. You hear of job creation and empowerment, and like claims of miracle by some pastors you never know or get to see any of the beneficiaries of such healing until the scam is exposed for what it is.*

Insincerity: *This is on the part of Nigerian government which through its officials engages in doublespeak thereby leaving people to respond with their varied understanding; interpretation and response. This complicates issues as it makes people take to their various social media outlets with their perceived understanding.*

Frustration: *The said insecurities coupled with the absence of basic amenities in the areas of water, light, good road networks, security and the attendant police brutality, among numerous others unlock the tongue and unleash various protestations which manifest in posts on social media.*

Injustice: *When people perceive what the government is doing or about to do as biased or unjust, they quickly react. Some times their reaction helps to nip such action in the bud and forestalls it.*

Humorists: *There are also those who make the social media bubble with their creativity. This group competes with the professional stand-up comedians in making fun of everything. The most serious issues of governance, private and public engagements serve as avenue for poking fun and this covers all the social media platforms and no subject is sacred. This group helps the ordinary citizen keep hope alive by giving him reason/cause to smile through its creative ingenuity.*

Advertisements: *With the Covid-19 imposed lockdown, people device and innovate ways of making ends meet. Many undergraduate students have taken to blogging, to petty trading, and others to whatever product catches their fancy, all in a bid to combat idleness and be relevant. Whatever the engagements may be, they must be advertised and social media provide ready and available outlets.”*

Aside the aforementioned reasons for expressive engagement with social media, despite censorship, there are other reasons established. Even though the respondents didn’t particularly fall under any of these other categories, they also acknowledged a possible participation of these group of users in the circumvention practices. They include:

“Personality Stalkers: *There are those who spend time and money stalking renowned personalities on the internet and social media. They are what Nigerians refer to as “monitoring spirits.” Their intentions are neither noble nor uplifting, rather, they manners of speech and writing; they then write all sorts of things and attribute study these personalities” styles and them to the said personalities. Some make money from it while others derive joy from such misinformation.*

Mischief making: *Some people cannot resist the joy of pranks; some go out of their way to test their popularity through fake information (a good number of youths are guilty of this), some also do it out of sheer ignorance.*

Idleness: *The Covid-19 fueled lockdown, which prevented people to leave their homes, created an escape for them through social media. The consequence is an avalanche of information and misinformation, fake news, all manners of fabrication and mischief making purportedly geared towards relieving people from the boredom of lockdown.”*

The use of circumvention to satisfy any of the above reasons was a strong motivation, especially for those who adopted the VPN technology, and those who jumped platform. The analysis from this research shows five stages of user behavior. These behavior is reflected in (DE SA, 2014) study on Brazilian Netflix users and VPNs. Following the banning of Twitter, users experienced and exhibited the universal five stages of grief and loss:

1. Denial and Isolation
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

The question following is whether circumvention is a solution to internet censorship in democracies? During the research, there is a particular need to explain the understanding of respondents situated in the emic concept of censorship compared to its scholarly concept. To them, censorship is an outright ban or platform lockdown, not necessarily a filtering of internet content. With this understanding, the results show that most circumvention practices are engaged to or with as a solution, and a cultural behavior to be embraced at all times against internet censorship. Circumvention in this case is engaged with as an activist practice, with the hopes that effective changes will be achieved against all forms of censorship by the government. This research is important as it tries to expand the scope of scholarly understanding of digital activism when compared to what currently exist in media and communication research. The result shows that the digital activism in the form of use of circumvention tools is a mirror of traditional activism, but however uniquely reflects and embody the atomization and individualization of contemporary political action (Uwalaka, 2017), what Bennett (et al., 2014) referred to as personal action frames in the logic of connective actions. Individuals engaged and led digital activism by themselves, for themselves against internet censorship by embracing possible circumvention practices.

This research work makes important contributions cutting across three dimensions: media users, technoculture and the theoretical focus – activist media practices. While future researchers may want to focus on media users and technoculture in the discourse of circumvention of internet censorship, an important angle of focus is the distinguishing factors between who is an activist and who is just a citizen. The blurring of the lines through digital activist practices or circumvention engagements acknowledged as a form of digital activism requires further study to make further concrete conclusions.

To once again summarize the findings of this study, there are three broad scope of circumvention practices embraced in the fight against internet censorship in Nigeria which are technology use,

self-censorship and platform jumping. The implications of these engagements range from personal risks on one end of the spectrum to the furthering of political efficacy on the other end. As a technology culture, circumvention is a form of digital activism intentionally engaged in by a significant number of circumvention tool users and strongly seen as a solution to internet censorship and a readily available engagement plan to fight against internet censorship.

Appendix

Survey

Department of Media and Communication,
Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden
Email: 20iham@sun.se

Dear Respondent,

I would be very grateful if you could answer the questions in this questionnaire, as I am collecting material for a Masters thesis in Media & Communication Studies, at Södertörn University, Sweden (www.sh.se/MKV).

This questionnaire has 17 questions including demography, and it is designed to obtain information on the academic research on the Twitter ban in Nigeria under the topic: Circumvention Culture, Digital Activism and Internet Censorship.

As a student of Södertörn University, the data is managed under European legislation for data protection (GDPR). Be assured that every information shared is anonymous and the data gathered from your responses will only be used for the purpose of this research.

Thanks.

Amaraizu, Iheanyi Genius
MA student, Södertörn University, Sweden (www.sh.se)

Please tick or fill as appropriate the option that best describes your response

1. Age

- a) 16 – 25 years
- b) 26 – 41 years
- c) 42 – 57 years
- d) 58 – 67 years

2. Gender

- a) Female
- b) Male

3. Education Level

- a) No schooling completed
- b) Primary school
- c) High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent
- d) Trade/technical/vocational training
- e) Bachelor's degree
- f) Master's degree
- g) Doctorate degree

4. Before Twitter ban in Nigeria in 2021, did you use Twitter?

- a) Yes
- b) No

5. For how long had you used twitter ?

- a) For one year or more
- b) For 3-12 months
- c) For less than 3 months

6. What is your main reason for using Twitter?

- a) Entertainment
- b) Education
- c) Business
- d) Other (what?)

Other...

7. How many hours do you spend daily on Twitter an ordinary day?
- a) 1-3 hours
 - b) 4-9 hours
 - c) 10-13 hours
 - d) More than 13 hours
8. Do you feel the banning of Twitter in Nigeria had an impact on you in any way?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
9. Did the Twitter ban deprive you any activity based on any of these?
- a) Entertainment
 - b) Education
 - c) Business
 - d) All of the above
 - e) None of the above
 - f) Other (name what)
- Other...
10. After the Twitter ban, did you use Twitter?
- a) Yes
 - b) No
11. Why did you still use Twitter despite the ban (tick all options that fit) ?
- a) For entertainment
 - b) For education
 - c) For business
 - d) As a form of protest against the government
 - e) Other (what?)
- Other...
12. Why did you avoid using Twitter after the ban?
- a) To obey the government
 - b) I do not use Twitter, with or without the ban
 - c) I could not access Twitter
 - d) Other

Other...

13. Have you experienced restriction in using the internet in Nigeria in any other form other than Twitter ban? (If yes, what?)

.....

14. Did you use another social media outlet during the ban? (If yes, which?)

.....

15. If you still used Twitter during the ban, how did you circumvent the ban?

- a) By using VPNs, proxy networks and encryption technologies
- b) By using alternative social media platforms
- c) I did not use Twitter during the ban
- d) Other (how?)

Other...

16. Do you think the ban of Twitter will encourage the government to ban other social media platforms?

- a) Yes
- b) No

17. Do you think the banning is an infringement to your right to freedom of expression?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Interview Questions

Q1. Do you feel the banning of Twitter in Nigeria had an impact on you in any way?

If Yes, in what ways?

Q2. After the Twitter ban, did you use Twitter?

Why did you still use or avoid using the platform?

Q3. If you used Twitter during the ban, in what ways have you engaged to circumvent the ban?

If you didn't use the platform, is that a circumvention engagement?

Q4. Have you experienced restriction of using the internet in Nigeria in any other form other than Twitter ban?

Tell about your experience.

Q5. Do you think the ban of Twitter was a reaction by the government against activism on the platform?

Or what do you think are the major reasons behind the ban?

Q6. For those who continued the use of microblogging platform despite its ban, do you consider the action as a form of digital activism?

If yes, in what sense? If otherwise, explain.

Q7. Do you think a successful ban of Twitter will encourage the government to ban other social media platforms?

Or will this end with Twitter ban?

Q8. If other social media platforms are banned, what circumvention practices will you likely engage in?

Q9. Do you think the banning is an infringement to your right to freedom of expression?

Why do you think so?

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