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Digital Technology's Long Shadow over Elections and Democracy

Talking Twitter and Nigeria's 2023 Elections

Introduction

On June 4, 2021, the Nigerian government banned the operations of microblogging site, Twitter, stating that the company's activities are "capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence". Some have argued that the government's action was not really predicated on a democratic concern about Twitter's influence on Nigeria's politics, but a vindictive reaction to the platform's deletion of President Buhari's violence-invoking, anti-Biafra Tweet. Yet, regardless of whether the Nigerian government's decision was reactionary or truly democratic, Nigeria's Twitter ban feeds into a broader global concern about the big techs' monopolising power over social conversations.

The influence of digital tech platforms has permeated all aspects of global politics and economy — from being able to disrupt the stock market (the GameStop short squeeze on Reddit) and making cross-border tax regulations more difficult (intangibility of assets), to the risks of data surveillance and misinformation. More worryingly, big techs' reach far outpaces the extent to which governments and international institutions have been able to regulate their activities. This reach produces impacts in the most unusual ways, raising a fundamental concern of whether the powers of social media platforms could truly be checked by the government.

The consequences of a heavily digitised globe are innumerable — from concerns of data privacy to cross-border inconsistency in data governance; cybersecurity; as well as misinformation and content moderation during important political moments. As a result, governments are becoming resistant of the scarcely regulated world of data assets in which big social media companies are in possession of large amount of customers' data that are rarely subject to public accountability (for instance, data on the numeric and demographic composition of Twitter users are publicly unavailable, while historic big data on trends/hashtags is only available to academic researchers).

As such, there have been numerous regulations or efforts targeting the governance and economic dynamics of digital tech —such as the push for a special antitrust law for big techs in the US, the Global Data Protection Regulation and Digital Sovereignty frameworks in the EU. Such policies that are generally "governance" and "economically " oriented have moved swiftly across the global south, as we begin to see a solid policy reaction in developing (African) countries in the areas of

data protection (e.g., the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation), the digital economy, cybersecurity, and data sharing.

Regulating the Political side of the Digital

However, despite these policy footprints, the political dimensions of social media impact have remained much-less regulated — more so on the African continent. Yet, the positive and negative externalities of social media on politics are wide-ranging than are often discussed. Too many times, countries focus only on disinformation and propaganda; yet the virtual world of social media has darker side-effects than just 'fake news' during elections. For instance, since voters' source of information has hugely shifted from traditional media to the digital, many risk being locked in an echo chamber, where a specific set of information (even if correct) is repeatedly fed to a group of people based on their digital profile. Combined with the fact that many social media platforms like Twitter lend convenience to 'brevity' rather than an elaborate analysis of political issues, unaudited algorithms would swiftly lead to the distortion of political views — increasing political polarisation — even if actors are acting on a factual set of information.

The chart below illustrates 5-umbrella areas where big tech platforms significantly impact politics.
Info Source: European Parliamentary Research Services (2021). Modified & Illustrated by: Dataphyte

While many of the pain points within each umbrella area above require a complex interaction of government, citizens, and social media operators, the highlights in red suggest areas that require the sole attention of social media administrators.
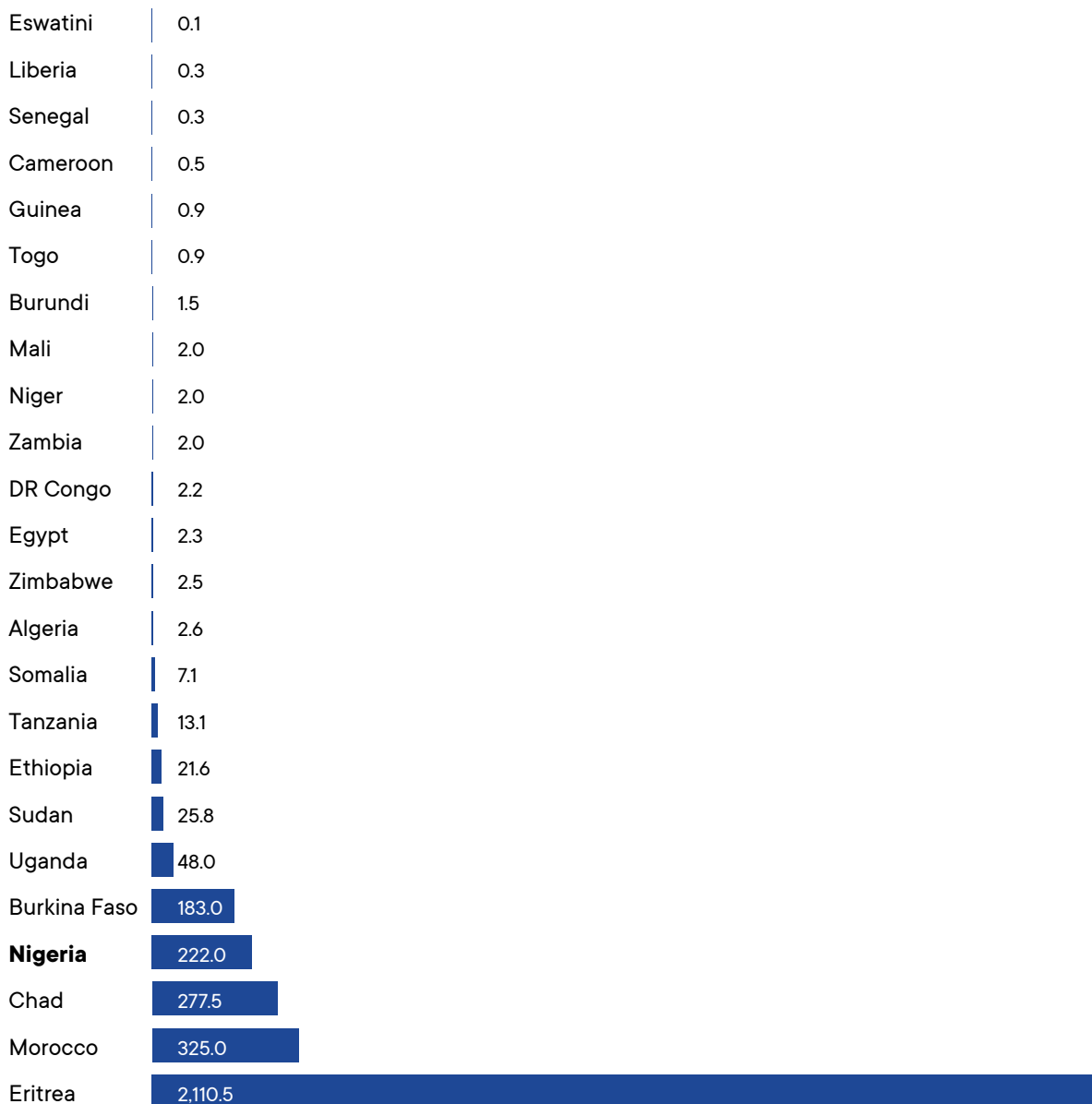
When it comes to elections, platforms like Twitter function as a townhall of ideas, where journalists and citizens reel out and monitor live updates on the voting process, civil society organisations mobilise and orientate the public, and policy makers share resources to keep the political conversation alive. For instance, during the 2019 general elections, many media organisations curated Twitter hashtags like #SnapandSend and #NigeriaDecides to mobilise citizens around a common resource and provide real-time results from each polling unit. Yet, while such free speech could flourish more easily with Twitter, determining "whose" speech flourishes is another dynamic that raises concern on the extent of the platform's sovereignty in content moderation. In the Tweet deletion controversy between the Nigerian government and Twitter, the FG rightly pointed out that Twitter had paid very little attention to censoring the divisive hate speech that pro-Biafra leader, Nnamdi Kanu, consistently churned out on the platform. Twitter operators only began deleting Nnamdi Kanu's Tweets 24 hours after the Nigerian government imposed a ban on the platform. Such selective moderation rarely catches the public's attention. Whether President Buhari's Tweets violated Twitter's engagement rules isn't up for debate, it sure did; the bigger concern is the lack of accountability and double standard that was swift to censor the President but let other non-state actors have a free day violating the platform's engagement rules. There was also Twitter's lack of poor procedural engagement with the government prior to the Tweet deletion.

One crucial thing to understand about the distortion of political views during elections is that its effects rarely stay on social media. Just as the digital media has been lauded for facilitating a cost-effective, real-time citizen mobilisation during civil moments, it also bears the risks of fuelling offline aggression even faster — as was in the case with the January 6 capitol insurrection in the USA.

While more established democracies can swiftly ramp up regulatory and legal responses to address situations such as this, fragile and near-autocratic ones often simply respond with internet censorship. For instance, with the exception of Russia and China, the majority of social media and internet censorships in the last decade have occurred in Asia and Africa (Africa leads on internet services suspension while Asian countries have blocked social media the most).

The chart below shows the list of African countries that have, at one point in the past, blocked access to one or more social media platforms. The Nigerian Twitter is the 4th most prolonged social media blockage in Africa so far, while countries like Burkina Faso and Eritrea still currently restrict access to Facebook and YouTube, respectively.

African Countries: Blocked Access to One or More Social Media Platforms (Number of Days)

| Country	Days
Eswatini	0.1
Liberia	0.3
Senegal	0.3
Cameroon	0.5
Guinea	0.9
Togo	0.9
Burundi	1.5
Mali	2.0
Niger	2.0
Zambia	2.0
DR Congo	2.2
Egypt	2.3
Zimbabwe	2.5
Algeria	2.6
Somalia	7.1
Tanzania	13.1
Ethiopia	21.6
Sudan	25.8
Uganda	48.0
Burkina Faso	183.0
Nigeria	222.0
Chad	277.5
Morocco	325.0
Eritrea	2,110.5

Data Source: Surfshark. Charted by: Dataphyte

These bans have generally occurred during election periods or civil unrest. In other words, the timing of the bans suggest that African governments are increasingly concerned about the mobilisation power of social media platforms during crucial political moments.

Yet, navigating the troubled waters of the digital during important political moments such as elections involves a compromise — a delicate balance between fighting divisive political rhetoric versus suppressing citizens' digital rights altogether. This is because the de facto and easy choice of shutting down social media can have a ripple effect on the continent's evolving gig economy, much of which heavily relies on citizens' ample access to digital platforms.

The Most Costly Social Media/Internet Blockage in Africa
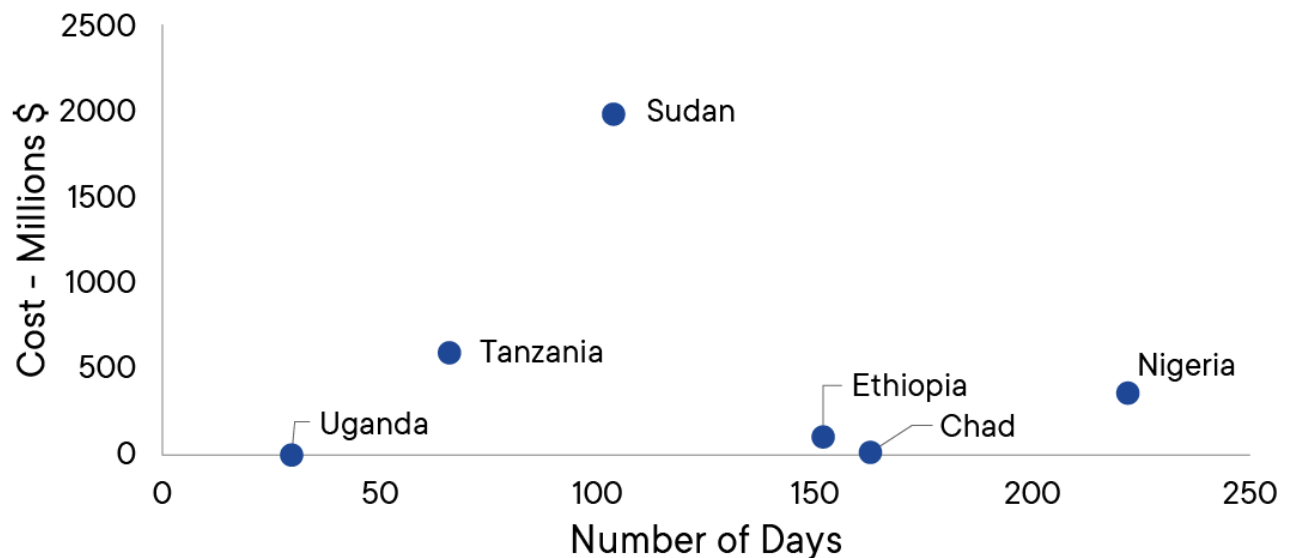
Year of Occurrence: Sudan: 2018 to 2019; Uganda: 2020; Chad: 2020, Ethiopia: 2020, Tanzania: 2020, Nigeria: 2021.
Data Source: Quartz Africa (2022). Charted by: Dataphyte

One subtle statistic from the chart above is that the length of digital access blockage does not correlate with the enormity of economic impacts in a country, i.e., there is generally no pattern between countries who have the longest restriction of services and those who lost the most economically — even the briefest restriction of social media could have tremendous economic impacts.

Nigeria's Twitter Ban and the 2023 Elections

Preventing a repeat of social media blockage is an important concern for Nigeria, as the 2023 elections draw near. Would the country witness another episode of "power" play between digital media platforms like Twitter or will big tech regulators step up their game in protecting democracy in the country? Noteworthily, Twitter has already begun to honour some of the conditions set by the Nigerian government during its reinstatement — including agreeing to a legal presence in Nigeria through registration with the Corporate Affairs Commission and the establishment of a physical office before the end 2022. Indeed, a quick search of the CAC portal shows that Twitter registered with the Commission in April 2022, stating a physical address in Lagos; of course, it is unsure whether the company has commenced physical operations in Nigeria. It is also uncertain whether it has commenced tax payments; not to forget that information about Twitter's revenue status in Nigeria is not publicly available, anyway.

1 Establishing a legal entity in Nigeria, including the operation of a physical address

2 Compliance with relevant tax regulations

3 Appointment of a country representative and registration with regulatory authorities (NIPDA, NCC, NBC)

4 Facilitating government's inclusion in Twitter's Partner Support and Law Enforcement Portal

5 A culture-sensitive operation that acknowledges Nigeria's political History

5 conditions Twitter agreed to with the Nigerian Government

■ Election-relevant

Of all these conditions, the most crucial to the forthcoming general elections are collaboration with Nigerian government officials in the management of prohibited content through Twitter's Partner Support and Law Enforcement and working with the government in developing a code of conduct that is culture sensitive. While one might be quick to applaud Twitter for being cooperative with regulatory demands, we must also raise questions as to why the regulations that could potentially shape political outcomes haven't been publicly addressed by the tech platform as of 6 months to the general elections.

Citizens may rightly argue that the politics-related aspect of the demands sets Nigeria on a path to digital autocracy (e.g., citizen surveillance during the elections). However, we need to recognise that the avenues set by the Nigerian government in implementing these regulations have been participatory, democratic, and institutional. This is reflected in the FG's explicit demand for Twitter's formal engagement with agencies such as the Corporate Affairs Commission (CAC), the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), and the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC). Recall also that the Minister of Communications, Lai Mohammed had noted that the FG was reaching an "amicable" solution with Twitter, adding that the social media company had acknowledged that the correspondence from the Nigerian government was the most detailed engagement it has ever received from any national government.

Besides, no single country in the world is allowing tech operators a free-day during elections— not even countries with a more stable democracy. The duty of citizens and civil society groups is to discourage every form of informational, legal, and technical tactics that politicians may introduce to digitally interfere in the elections, while in the same vein, encouraging, not disincentivizing, tech platforms to comply with legal regulations.

Lessons from Kenya

Recent events in the last decade could justify several governments' desperation to "rein-in" Twitter's activities in the coming elections. Perhaps, the most relevant example here is the (in)famous interference of Cambridge Analytica in the U.S.' 2016 elections and violation of citizens' data privacy through targeted political advertising, aided by Facebook's complicity. What is however unknown to many is

that, in a more covert manner which came to light much later, Cambridge Analytica was also involved in the general elections of two of Africa's largest democracies — Kenya and Nigeria — in 2017 and 2019, respectively.

If any African country should be gravely concerned about digital interference in its elections, it should be the duo of Kenya and Nigeria. Indeed, in the recently concluded 2022 Kenyan General Elections, Twitter acknowledged that the election was "happening on Twitter". Commendably, the platform then developed a wide-range of responses proportional to the scale of its influence in the elections, including: partnering with fact-checking organisation, Africa Check to curb misinformation; collaborating with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) in launching an election prompt that directs people from Twitter to the agency's website for credible election information; curating election-tailored Twitter Moments, and offering safety and security trainings to local partners.

Twitter's approach in Kenya summarised:

Partnership
Collaborating with Africa Check to fact-check potentially misleading information on Twitter.

Verifying the accounts
of Government officials, NGOs, news organisations, and other relevant actors

Amplifying Credible Information

Custom Kenyan Election Emojis

Kenyan Election Prompt with the IEBC

Twitter Moments for election misinformation

Expanding the content of its **Civic Integrity Policy**

Local Engagement
Digital Security trainings for partner organisations

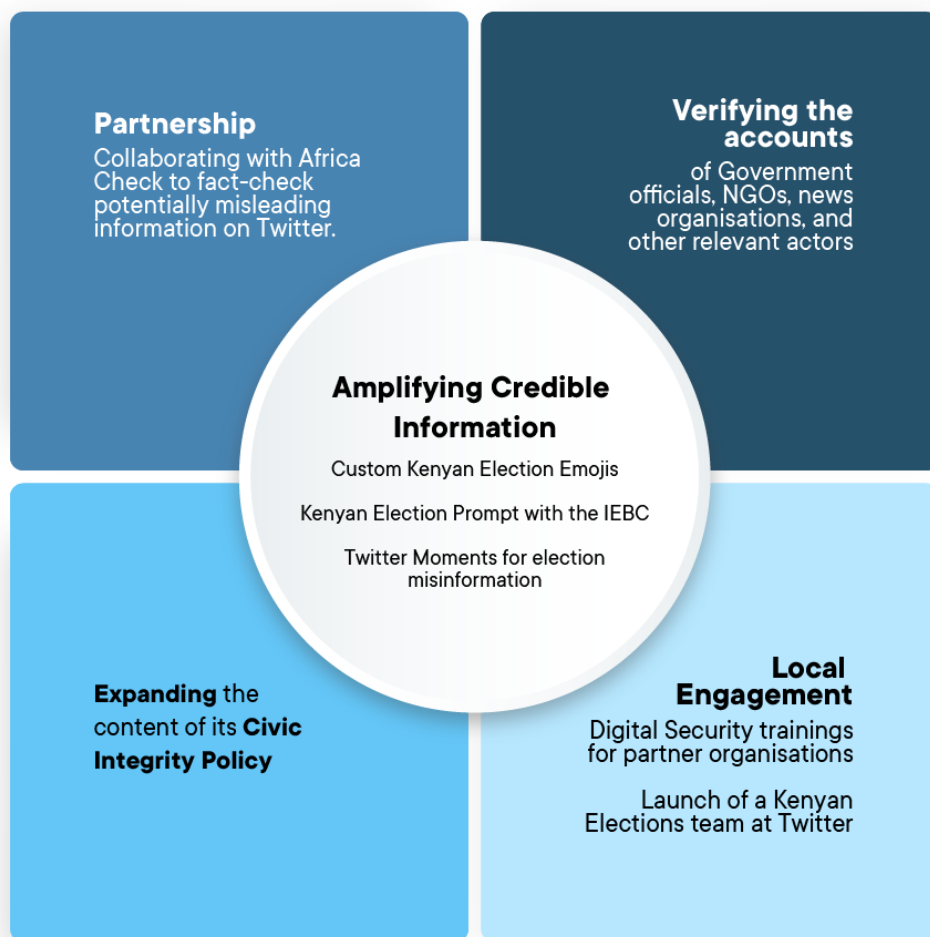Launch of a Kenyan Elections team at Twitter

Chart: Dataphyte

While Twitter's steps in Kenya are laudable, they are somewhat a precursor and rather too basic. For Nigeria's 2023 elections, the company's approach to addressing these concerns must critically build on its Kenyan successes — taking lessons where needed and adapting them to the more-heated political space that Nigeria operates in. The tech platform needs to adopt a thoughtful and comprehensive set of programmes that engages policymakers, civil society, and citizens in making the digital space a safe haven for democracy in Nigeria. Simply banning political ads (which is actually counter-democratic) or updating its user policies isn't enough; the platform needs to signal to the Nigerian government that it is serious about honouring the political conditions of its reinstatement. Digital technology platforms are "the new battleground for democracy", and tech operators must responsibly guard the space, or they risk the government doing it for them in a manner that represses digital freedom, hurts businesses, and undermines democracy altogether.
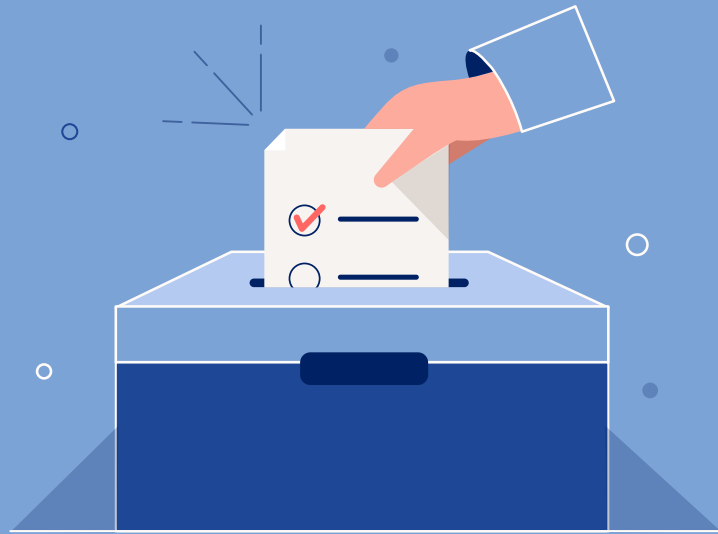
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