



Sub-Saharan Political Cultures of Deceit in Language, Literature, and the Media, Volume II

Across National Contexts

Edited by
Esther Mavengano · Isaac Mhute

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Digital Authoritarianism in Postcolonial Nigeria: Internet Control Techniques and Censorship

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INTRODUCTION

Digital authoritarianism, based on the authoritarian theory of mass communication, is where the media is influenced and overpowered by power and authority in the nations (Bajracharya, 2018). The authoritarian concept is anchored on the belief that the media must respect and work in accordance with the wishes of authorities, although not under direct control of the state or ruling classes and cannot work independently and their works are subjected to censorship (Bajracharya, 2018).

In the evolution of mass media in Nigeria from the colonial era through the long years of military rule, which ended in 1999 and the commencement of the civilian administration till date, there has always

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been an attempt by successive governments to muzzle or control the press. Under various governments the instruments of control have largely been through legislation, physical surveillance, banning or closure, and other security measures including destruction of property (printed copies of Newspapers and magazines).

However, with the advent of digital technology, especially in the last decade, it has been observed that the legacy of military rule—authoritarianism—still persists in Nigeria, including in media control. The government in Nigeria has not fully matured into a true democracy with respect for freedom of speech and expression enshrined in Section 39 of the 1999 Constitution as amended in 2011. In addition, Section 22 of the same Constitution stresses that the mass media shall at all times be free to uphold the responsibility and accountability of the government of the people.

Despite these provisions, Nigerian governments have over the years infringed on press freedom and media rights. The stricture is more in the digital journalism era. Thus, this paper looks into digital authoritarianism in Nigeria as a carryover from the past by various administrations to maintain a hold on the media, especially in the dissemination of information through electronic technology, which blossomed in the last decades with internet penetration along with thousands of websites and bloggers, who disseminate raw information about happenings in the society including government activities.

This work on “Digital Authoritarianism in Nigeria: Internet Control techniques and Censorship” outlines measures adopted by Nigerian governments over the last decade to control or muzzle digital media and space in the country. It also provides information on how digital media have thrived in the country despite attempts to muzzle it.

The study reviewed literatures on digital authoritarianism and analyzed data obtained through in-depth interviews of 37 media professionals. It made a startling finding that a good number of the media personnel have no inkling of what digital authoritarianism is about.

OBJECTIVES

1. To discover how the federal government of Nigeria has been muzzling the digital media.
2. To examine the measures through which the government hinder the media from fulfilling its constitutional obligations.

3. To outline how media practitioners have coped with digital authoritarianism.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is the Nigerian government influencing information dissemination through digital media?
2. What techniques are the government using to muzzle or censor the digital media?
3. How is the media coping with digital authoritarianism in Nigeria?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Digital authoritarianism in Nigeria was examined through the framework of the authoritarian theory of the press. This concept explained why different variants of government—monarchy, dictatorship, liberal, communist, totalitarian, and even democracies—grab the theory to justify control and suppression of the media albeit the modern-day digital media, all in a bid to protect their sovereignty. Fred S. Siebert et al. (1956) noted that authoritarian theory was adopted by most countries when society and technology became sufficiently developed to produce the “mass media” of communication.

For Siebert, the theory is the basis for the press systems in many modern societies; even where it has been abandoned, it has continued to influence the practices of a number of governments, which theoretically adhere to libertarian principles and has determined the mass communication pattern for more people over a longer time than any other theory of press control.

The scholar’s view on authoritarian theory paves way for understanding why Nigeria uses instruments of the state to control and censor the digital media given its capacity to reach mass audience. Nigeria runs a hybrid government swinging between dictatorship and liberalism that would do everything to protect its sovereignty by controlling and suppressing information dissemination through the mass media, which could torpedo the state if otherwise is done.

The above postulations justify the use of authoritarian theory to study the modern-day ubiquity of the digital media and the effort of the state

to effectively control the digital media and how the media can be free from being repressed.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Digital authoritarianism in this study concerns measures adopted by the government of Nigeria to curb dissemination of information through electronic technology and require professional and amateur journalists to submit to the whims and caprices of the authorities. This definition is supported by the authoritarian theory of mass communication which illustrated how English monarchs used this approach when the printing press was invented by censoring, licensing, taxation, and making laws (Bajracharya, 2018). This normative theory of mass communication practice in nations stresses state capture of mass media which must respect what authorities want and work according to their wishes even though they are not under direct control of the state or ruling classes. The press and media cannot work independently and their works are subjected to censorship (Bajracharya, 2018).

Agreeing, Roberts and Ali (2021) recorded how digital authoritarian states and corporations use digital technologies to suppress the media, adding that in Africa, Egypt, and Zimbabwe imported artificial intelligence-based technologies from the United States and China to spy on their own citizens' mobile and internet communications. They concluded that such actions by the state close civic space and diminish citizens' rights to freedom of opinion and expression and culminate in internet shutdowns by African governments. For instance, Nigeria shut down Twitter from operating in the country's internet space for seven months and only reopened it in January 2022.

Control techniques are guidelines, legal instruments, and other covert and overt means through which the government prevents the digital media from disseminating information it does not want to make public. Thus a digital authoritarian gathers information about citizens and consumers through technical advances in data analytics and machine learning—ranging from mass facial recognition system to predictive policing. Both democratic and authoritarian countries face an increasingly self-sustaining cycle of surveillance and data extraction that is reducing individual consent (Miller, 2020).

The state also controls digital media professionals through threats they face in the discharge of their duties—such as arrests, legal action, imprisonment, kidnapping, intimidation, bombing, killings, and various other forms of harassment and violence (Ogwezzy-Ndisika et al., 2021), in addition to information walls through fear, friction, and flooding as digital repressive toolkit. Other strictures on free flow of information online by the state include censoring critical voices, targeted blocking of Internet Protocol (IP) Address, Domain Name System (DNS) filtering, and redirection or Uniform Resource Locator (URL) filtering. An example is the firewall created by China. Also, governments increasingly pressure tech companies to take down content and share user data, which can be observed in transparency reports published by large online platforms (Glowacka et al., 2021).

Censorship, in this context, refers to methods of suppression of the digital media in Nigeria. Citizens' digital rights are breached if they are subject to digital surveillance; if they are covertly targeted with disinformation to manipulate their beliefs and behavior; if their mobile or internet connection is restricted (Roberts & Ali, 2021); internet shut-downs, and paywalls. Digital dictators target traditional democratic values and freedoms; flood the internet and other outlets for speech, press, and assembly with inauthentic accounts (“bots”), deepfakes, and use new tools of digital propaganda to amplify narratives, build polarization, and increase “us versus them” divisions; determine the kind of messages their population can and cannot access with the help of advanced communications technologies, which can also prevent them from contributing to online discussions or mobilization (Miller, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The increasing trend in digital authoritarianism across the world with media personnel bearing the brunt is largely due to the state's determination to control information dissemination in the digital age. This proclivity to maintain an iron fist on the media has been on from the authoritarian days of colonialism and military dictatorships and has transcended to the present age of the ubiquitous internet. As stated earlier, this is based on the authoritarian theory of mass media. Consequently, digital authoritarianism which has been spreading globally cuts across different regime types and implicates companies developing cutting-edge

technologies, a common element across these efforts is surveillance and control (Miller, 2020).

The international sale and government contracting of these new and powerful tools drive us toward an uncertain, potentially less democratic future (Miller). With the aid of newer technologies states can now easily shut down the internet in their various spheres of influence. Internet shutdowns dominate in developing and/or non-democratic countries, where relevant protective legal provisions are non-existent or limited and rarely acted upon (Glowacka et al., 2021). Glowacka et al. documented about 213 shutdowns in 33 countries in 2019. India led with 385 shutdowns since 2012, followed by Venezuela, Yemen, and Iraq. Also, Bangladesh, Belarus, Ethiopia, Indonesia India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe were listed among those that imposed or continued with internet shutdowns.

Other examples of digital shutdowns recorded by Glowacka et al. during the pandemic included the blackout and phone restrictions state authorities imposed on the Rohingya refugee camps in Bangladesh, which hindered humanitarian groups from addressing threats posed by COVID-19. They concluded that internet shutdown, which vary in scale, scope, location, and frequency, have detrimental effects on society, limits access to reliable, open, secure, and affordable internet and therefore prevents the dissemination of critical for development of the society.

In Nigeria, the internet space was partially shut down when Twitter was banned in June 2021 by Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari after his tweet was deleted by the platform and his account suspended temporarily over a tweet on the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) agitation. The offensive tweet: “those who misbehave today” will be treated in “the language they will understand,” inferred to the wanton killings of people from the South East during the Nigerian-Biafran Civil War 1967–1970. The tweet infringed on Twitter user rules prohibiting content that threatens or incites violence. Nigerians circumvented the ban on Twitter site by using Virtual Private Networks (VPN) and shared their opinion on other apps, like Indian-based microblogging site Koo (Blakenship & Golubski, 2021).

The authors said deletion of the tweet is part of a larger conversation around the role of social media in politics and the national conversation as the world has seen social media platforms like Twitter impact democracy and politics, social movements, foreign relations, businesses, and

economies around the world in recent years (Blakenship & Golubski, 2021).

MOMENTUM IN DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM GLOBALLY

A perspective into how digital authoritarianism is gaining momentum across the globe has been linked to a combination of retreating US leadership and the COVID-19 pandemic which emboldened China to expand and promote its tech-enabled authoritarianism as world's best practice (Khalil, 2020). He documented how Chinese engineered digital surveillance and tracking systems are now exported around the globe in line with China's Cyber Superpower Strategy.

This is also setting standards and new norms on digital rights, privacy and data collection, suppression of dissent at home, and promoting the CCP's geostrategic goals. The danger for other countries importing Chinese technology, Khalil argued, is that it will result in a growing acceptance of mass surveillance, habituation to restrictions on liberties, and fewer checks on the collation and use of personal data by the state, even after the public health crisis subsides. Thus, she warned democratic governments to be vigilant in setting standards and preserving citizens' rights and liberties.

The warning resonated in the study on 10 digital rights landscape countries—Zimbabwe, Zambia, Uganda, Sudan, South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Ethiopia, Egypt, and Cameroun—detailing how opening and closing of online civic space affects citizens' digital rights (Roberts & Ali, 2021). The argument of Khalil, Robert, and Ali justified the 2021 online campaign in Nigeria for #EndSARS nationwide protest against police brutality, which the state promptly described as an attempt to overthrow the government. This authoritarian bent to governance culminated in the clampdown on the protesters at the Lekki toll gate in Lagos, which was streamed online. The Nigerian youth went online to begin their campaign to get the government to scrap the draconian security apparatus, which was supposed to crack down on criminals but instead turned its angst on youths and citizens who were mostly innocent. Aggrieved youths who could not find space offline in the society began their mobilization online.

Consequently, the protests and the subsequent crackdown on the famous Lekki toll gate protesters. In milieu that ensued, both the traditional and digital media which covered the event were targeted for

harassment, violence, extortion, and in some cases elimination by security agents. For instance, Obianuju Catherine Ude, popularly known as DJ Switch, who streamed live the Lekki Toll gate crackdown is now on an asylum in Canada after alleged threat to her life by the state.

The crackdown on Lekki protesters elicited global outrage. Consequently, Nigeria deployed the five tactics often used by the state to close online civic space in Africa. They include digital surveillance, disinformation, internal shutdowns, legislation, and arrest for online speech (Roberts & Ali, 2021).

Also, StearsData report (undated) commissioned by Luminate stated that the Nigerian government has been building its surveillance capacity, with allocated budgets exceeding NGN15 billion since 2017. Although the government claims that these capabilities are being built to fight domestic terrorism, StearsData stated they can be used to spy on citizens.

According to the scholars, any comprehensive analysis of digital rights requires consideration of the wider political, civic space, and technological contexts. They argue that countering the threats to democracy and digital rights required new evidence, awareness, and capacity and proposed applied research to build new capacity in each country to effectively monitor, analyze, and counter the insidious impact of surveillance and disinformation; and a program to raise awareness and mobilize opinion to open civic space and improve citizens' ability to exercise, defend, and expand their digital rights.

Even so, authoritarian states tend to sustain their hold on the digital space by being pragmatic, resourceful, and connected to a global network of governments and companies that mutually benefit from sharing data and funding research projects; this next innovation in authoritarianism will increasingly encourage self-censorship and cyber sovereignty to reduce the influence of democracy activists and free press, both at home and abroad (Miller, 2020).

Corroborating, Dorota Glowacka et al. (2021) added that the challenge related to the use of digital technologies by authoritarian regimes has continued to deepen as liberal democracies like EU undertook many valuable and well-designed policy initiatives in this field, but still have to decide whether tackling digital repression is a core geopolitical interest at the highest political level.

INSTRUMENTS FOR DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN NIGERIA

As the threat to digital rights in Nigeria increases, one of the laws enacted to control digital media is the Cybercrimes (Prohibition and Prevention) Act 2015 which comprises wide-ranging legal, regulatory, and institutional framework that prohibits, prevents, detects, prosecutes, and punishes cybercrimes (Uba, 2021).

There is also the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 that prohibits unauthorized transmission, obtaining, reproduction, or retention of any classified matter. Other legislation and regulations which can be used broadly to restrict digital space in Nigeria include the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) Act 2007 Section 26; the National Health Act 2014; Federal Competition and Consumer Protection Act 2019; and the Consumer Protection Framework of 2016.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research used purposive sampling method to select media stakeholders who were interviewed through structured questionnaire done over a period of two weeks to generate qualitative data in addition to the information generated through literature review. Those interviewed include media professionals, who are mostly members of the Guild of Corporate Online Publishers (GOCOP), an 82-member umbrella peer review group of professional journalists. Thirty-seven media practitioners were interviewed based on the three research questions stated above to ascertain the veracity of the authoritarian theory as the basis for the study and also examined whether professionalism by the media can check digital authoritarianism.

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviewees, who are marked A-1 to A-37, are all based in Nigeria. 77.8% of them are within the age range from 51 to 60, 11.1% (31–50) while above 60 (11.1%). Their educational qualifications ranged from 55.6% (Master's Degree), 11.1% (PhD) while 33.3% had other educational qualifications which were not specified. Surprisingly despite their

educational qualifications not all of them responded to all the questions asked. But those who did elucidate on digital authoritarian practice, control and techniques.

Q1: KNOWLEDGE OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Responses from 16 interviewees showed knowledge of digital authoritarianism although one of the journalists called on the phone to request for explanation of the concept. Summarily, the responses captured salient aspects of digital authoritarianism to include censorship of the digital media/population by the state through the use of technology. The three responses that stood out are:

Digital authoritarianism “Is the way that many leaders around the world wield the power of the internet and technology to gain or solidify control over their people.”—(A-1)

“This refers to the use of IT, social media to control populations usually by government.”—(A-2)

“Censorship of the social media/online media”—(A-5)

Q2: BEGINNING OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN NIGERIA

Responses from 17 participants showed different dates for the commencement of digital authoritarianism in the country although state control of the media in Nigeria began during the colonial rule in the nineteenth century and transcend to military dictatorship of the 1980s and the hybrid authoritarian/democratic practice now. Striking responses tracing its origin are thus:

“As soon as Nigeria joined the information superhighway during Obasanjo’s first tenure as civilian President in 1999/2000. Internet explorer came with Facebook, etc.” (A-11)

“Digital authoritarianism began at the dawn of the millennium and blossomed with the growth and advancement of democracy and technology which gave the people the impetus to increasingly question how their lives are being run by their leadership. (A-12)

“With Cybercrimes Act of 2015” (A-14)

Q3: HOW DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM PLAY OUT IN NIGERIA

Seventeen respondents are of the view that digital authoritarianism manifests in the form of June 4, 2021, shutdown of microblogging platform (Twitter); regulation of the use of technological devices; state labeling every news not authored by them as fake, censorship, digital surveillance, data collection, propaganda, patronage; clampdown on opposing online media/social media practitioners, legislation, and policy framework; and surveillance by security agencies, tapping of phone lines, emails.

Companies also collect data on sites visited by people and flood their mails and social media platforms with adverts along their perceived preferences. Also, it occurs through state quest to control information mechanism, subversion of civil liberties, and open society institutions; deliberate shutdown of internet using security agencies' equipment, targeting online owners.

One of the striking responses states: "The Cybercrimes Act specifies limits and areas that people must not cross. It makes defamation a criminal rather than civil offence" (A-15).

Q4: TARGETS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM AND WHY

Interviewees listed targets of digital authoritarianism as the Nigerian press, civil society groups, entire population largely youths; critics of government, online publishers, editors; activists, and whistleblowers.

Q5: CAUSES OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Interviewees cited inciting statements, fake news; desire to control the heart and minds of the people, deception, intolerance, fear of public opinion and adverse criticism; desires by companies to advertise products; abuse of power, misinformation, and dissemination of false information as the cause for stricture of media. Statement by two interviewees captured the causes thus:

"Digital authoritarianism is caused by "The crave by autocratic governments to maintain firm control and ensure that the people of the society don't challenge their corrupt conduct and abuse of office." (A-11)

“With the advent of citizen journalism, obviously, the scope of journalism has widened. Through this, ‘top secrets’ are being revealed. This is clearly not in the best interest of the government.” (A-12)

Q6: NIGERIANS’ REACTION TO DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Data from interviewees show that Nigerians react negatively, passively, and cautiously to digital authoritarianism. They also condemn, create awareness about its implications, and resort to lawsuits. Some use alternative IT channels to circumvent restrictions like switching to VPN to bypass the recent Twitter ban.

In the case of phone tapping, they use encrypted platforms like WhatsApp; advocacy. For instance, Interviewee (A-16) said:

“Digital authoritarianism is a development that is not welcomed by most Nigerians. And so, whenever there is whip of authoritarianism creeping in, such as the Cybercrimes Act, ban of twitter etc, Nigerians collectively rise against such development.”

Q7: INSTRUMENTS OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN NIGERIA

Interviewees listed the instruments state use to muzzle the media as mass surveillance, internet fire walls and censorship, internet blackout, coercion, pronouncements by government agencies; regulations, use of online digital platforms, social media, radio and television for disinformation, spy gadgets; cyber stalking law; veiled threats and refusal of support/patronage/adverts to practitioners.

Others are propaganda; intimidation by security agents—the DSS and intelligence agencies, police, Armed Forces, and EFCC and ICPC; restriction of the internet and social media systems which has enhanced public freedom and right of speech; anti-social media bill; executive orders; and use of artificial intelligence, high-tech surveillance, and repression.

Q8: INSTANCES OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN NIGERIA

Sixteen interviewees variously cited ban of Twitter and the directive to prosecute users of the microblogging and social networking service who defied the order; police arrest of youths indiscriminately, which resulted in the ENDSARS protests; arrest/detention of some of practitioners; threat of enactment of social media bill to censor social media/online practitioners; compulsory NIN registration, BVN et al.; and jailing of government critics.

Q9: TECHNIQUES THE GOVERNMENT USES TO CONTROL DIGITAL MEDIA IN NIGERIA

Only eight interviewees were able to state the techniques government uses to muzzle the digital media. They include shut down of media houses; ban on the use of social media (Twitter); use of social media influencers; legal arm twisting, intimidation; introduction of new broadcasting rules and heavy fines on broadcast stations just to gag the media; deploying existing and new legislation; clampdown on critics and media owners; regulations, undue monitoring, denial of patronage/advertisement, cyber bullying and licensing of digital space.

Q10: OPERATORS OF DIGITAL MEDIA CONTRIBUTE TO DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Seventeen interviewees stated that digital media operators contribute to digital authoritarianism by being blackmailers; publication of falsehood which places the government on a moral pedestal to act; unprofessional conducts and deliberately misinforming the public at times.

For instance, Interviewee—A7 said:

“Some unscrupulous operators deliberately publish fake and damaging reports which could threaten the safety and territorial integrity of the Nation.”

QII. HOW NOT TO BE VICTIM OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Seventeen interviewees opined that media practitioners can avoid digital authoritarianism by being professional, sticking to ethics; upgrading knowledge, IT skills; propagating truth, fairness, and objectivity; fact checking and having zero tolerance for fake stories; having a strong legal department, etc. The views of interviewee A-2 capture it thus:

“Media need to adhere strictly to the ethics of their trade. 2. They need to be more professional whether as traditional or new media practitioners. 3. They need to constantly engage in order review to remind themselves of their responsibilities and what they needed to do to come back to the sanity lane. 4. Always remind themselves of the sacred role of the media and the need to defend the people against dictatorship.”

Q12: ROLE THE SOCIETY (CBO, NGOs, CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS) PLAYS TO NEGATE DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

The respondents agreed in their various responses that the civil society should continue advocating for free press, transparency in government, respect for human rights; set agenda for free media; resist muzzling of public opinion; train and engage the media; sensitize the public; lobby National Assembly to prevent harsh legislation against the media; protest against internet shutdown; and scrutinize every government. Interviewees A-12 captured the views of all the views of all the seventeen respondents stating society can help the media: “By remaining resolute and committed to the principles of open society system; through promotion of democratic ethics to strengthen democracy and through collaborative partnership with other agents of democracy and interface with government so as to build mutual trust and understanding.”

Q13: PROFESSIONALISM AS A CHECK TO DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Surprisingly, out of 13 responses, 10 interviewees agreed that professionalism can curb digital authoritarianism. One said “no” outright while another said “it will not help completely.” Interviewees A-11 suggested that:

“A group of media professionals can come together to set a new tone to regulate digital operations of their members. A group known as GOCOP currently serves that purpose for media professionals in the online/ new media space”.

Q14: FUTURE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Majority of the interviewees predicted a bright but challenging future. Of the 17 responses only five predicted a tough and bleak future field with landmines. The positive views were captured by Interviewee A-5, who stated:

“Despite threats of authoritarianism. Digital media is the future of media practice. People can no longer wait to be served news any more. New media has come to fill that space and it is doing so creditably despite the gaps and challenges besetting the industry presently.”

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Qualitative data from the literature reviewed and opinions from interviews with media practitioners fulfilled the objectives of the study. They were used to establish that Nigeria has been influencing the digital media through regulations and censorship, undue monitoring, denial of patronage/advertisement, arrests and detention of practitioners; cyber bullying and licensing of digital space among others. All these measures were corroborated by scholars such as Miller, Glowacka et al. and backed by the authoritarian theory of the mass media propounded by Siebert, Shepherd, Machiavelli, who advocated state stricture of the media to protect sovereignty.

Given the limited time for this research which lasted three weeks, it is only an attempt to establish, define, and analyze the various techniques of digital authoritarianism used by state authorities in various countries, Nigeria in particular. It also outlined the impacts of the techniques on the rule of law, press freedoms, human rights, and democracy and amplified the fact that digital journalism has come to stay in Nigeria and that practitioners are not going to be fazed by digital authoritarianism as respondents predict a bright future for the industry.

The study gathered qualitative information from media workers, mostly those practicing in the digital media through structured in-depth interviews. In large part, many of the responses supported the theoretical framework for this paper that digital authoritarianism is borne out of the state's determination to control, suppress, and influence the online media. They also agreed that such a move by government infringed on the rights of freedom of speech and also contrary to the obligation of the media to hold government accountable.

The study identified techniques of digital authoritarianism in Nigeria to include legislation, crackdowns; spy gadgets; cyber stalking law; veiled threats; refusal of support or give patronage/adverts to practitioners; and intimidation of citizens/journalists by security agents. It was also found that state deploy information technology, artificial intelligence; propaganda to foil public freedom and right of speech. Also identified are mass surveillance, internet fire walls and censorship, and internet blackout. These findings are in line with the opinions of scholars on authoritarian theory of mass communication which was used for his research, although such acts by the state breached constitutional provisions on obligations of the press and freedom of speech.

An important finding is that media practitioners own up that some online journalists and social users are partly to blame for digital authoritarianism because of fake news, hate speech, and dissemination of false information, which government seeks to curtail through regulations such as the Cybercrime Act; propaganda and disinformation among others. The study found that digital authoritarianism is based on the principle of authoritarian theory of mass communication whereby the state seeks to control the mass media to ensure it disseminates only the information that is in its interest. Respondents agreed that digital authoritarianism exists in Nigeria through "Clampdown on opposing online media/social media professionals//mediums."

According to respondents, the reason for digital authoritarianism is because state authorities want to establish sovereign control over online information space. This explains why multiple states have adopted measures to control the flow of data in and out of their national borders and isolate "domestic" internet from the global network. Hence imposing new cross-border data transfer and storage restrictions, as well as centralizing technical infrastructure as a necessary protection for user privacy, to improve cybersecurity threats against threats posed globally (Glowacka et al., 2021).

Of all the responses on digital authoritarianism, only three stood out. Interviewee A-1 described digital authoritarianism as “the way that many leaders around the world wield the power of the internet and technology to gain or solidify control over their people.” Interviewee A-2 described it as “the use of IT, social media to control populations usually by government”; while Interviewee A-3 said: “Digital authoritarianism is the use of the internet and it’s many social media variants by leaders with authoritarian or dictatorial tendencies; a means by which governments and business entities control their citizens through technology.”

Summarily, 17 respondents believe that digital authoritarianism began in Nigeria “Since the early 2000s from the advent of the internet in Nigeria but became more vicious since the current government and in particular with the enacting of the Cybercrimes Act of 2015. It escalated in 2021 when government suspended Twitter”. For disseminators of information, who ought to be well informed on issues pertaining to their profession, some responses from respondents reinforce the notion that some online media professionals do not adequately know/understand digital authoritarianism or when it started in Nigeria as can be seen in the following responses: “Not quite sure but can’t be recent”; “Digital authoritarianism began at the dawn of the millennium and blossomed with the growth and advancement of democracy and technology which gave the people the impetus to increasingly question how their lives are being run by their leadership.” One interviewee said “March 29, 1984, “Buhari’s administration,” while another said: “Around 2015 shortly after the onset of the Bihari administration,” and “It is safe to declare that it started with the advent of social media.” These responses support the need to build the capacity and increase awareness and knowledge of media professionals on the control and regulation digital authoritarianism in the country.

Another important finding is that some journalists who are transiting to digital journalism from the traditional media do not understand the concept of digital authoritarianism and are therefore not in a position to protect or defend their rights. One of the journalists interviewed actually asked for an explanation of what digital authoritarianism was about? This is probably why Roberts and Ali stated that countering new threats to democracy and digital rights requires new evidence, awareness, and capacity. The data is not available, but some journalists in Nigeria are not even aware of the media laws and the contents of Cybersecurity Law

of 2015 or the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act of 2011 relating to guidelines for their operation.

The study showed that journalists in Nigeria are resilient in doing their job despite digital authoritarianism. Some of them have survived the strong-arm tactics of the State including Agba Jalingo, an online journalist, who was charged with treason in Cross River State, South-South Nigeria, for criticizing State governor Ben Ayade. There was the case of Jonathan Ugbal and Jeremiah Archibong, news editor and managing editor, respectively, for the CrossRiverWatch, an online newspaper owned by Jalingo. The pair was charged with “unlawful assembly” for covering a protest and prosecuted by the police. Ugbal and Archibong were arrested by the police in Calabar on August 5, 2019, alongside Nicholas Kalu, the Calabar Correspondent of *The Nation* newspaper, while covering the #RevolutionNow protest called by Nigerian activist Omoyele Sowore. Janlingo was recently released and freed from all charges of defamation and treason.

Nonetheless, there is a need for improved citizen sensitization and mobilization, awareness creation as well as building and strengthening the capacity of journalists to protect the rights of citizens and for effectively check of digital authoritarianism.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. As part of efforts to counter the threats to democracy and digital rights, this work recommends deliberate development of a body of evidence, awareness creation as well as capacity building and strengthening of citizens and media professionals.
2. There should also be effective analysis and monitoring of various digital authoritarian measures, increased stakeholder knowledge, and constructive engagements by various arms and agencies of government, civil society groups, the media, and other non-state actors toward addressing the concerns of state authorities, the media, and citizens at large.
3. While state authorities should be persuaded to eschew the tendency toward abridgement of the fundamental human rights and press freedom, through digital authoritarianism, the media must also undertake through self-regulatory mechanism, measures to curtail fake news, hate speech, and violation of individual or corporate freedoms under the guise of exercising press freedom.

CONCLUSION

The research buttressed the need for safeguard and protection of fundamental human rights, press freedom, and improvement of the digital media space. It agrees with (Roberts and Ali) on the need for a program to raise awareness and mobilize opinion to open civic space and improve citizens' ability to exercise, defend, and expand their digital rights.

There is also need to strengthen the capacity of both the citizens and media professionals, in particular online journalist for increased knowledge of existing and emerging legislation related to digital authoritarianism to ensure that the state remains steadfast to uphold constitutional provision for a free digital media with obligations to hold government accountable. If this is done, the future is bright for digital media practitioners, who will be empowered to know not to exceed the bounds of their freedom.

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