



GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL MEDIA AND GOVERNMENT POLICY IN NIGERIA¹

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Abstract. *This study examines the role of social media in governance and government policy in Nigeria. Specifically, it analyses how social media facilitates civic engagement, political mobilisation, and public discourse; interrogates the policy and regulatory instruments deployed by the Nigerian state in managing social media activities; and assesses the broader implications of social media for governance, public policy, and democratic norms. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study relies on case study analysis of two high-profile governance episodes: the #EndSARS movement (2020) and the Twitter suspension (2021). Data are drawn from secondary sources, including government documents, policy instruments, media reports, and scholarly literature. Findings indicate that social media has significantly expanded citizen participation and advocacy, enabling rapid mobilisation and influencing government responses. At the same time, it presents governance challenges, including misinformation, hate speech, and tensions between digital rights and state regulation. Government interventions, ranging from legislative proposals and administrative codes to coercive measures, reveal persistent tensions between state authority, democratic accountability, and public trust. The study concludes that while social media constitutes a powerful tool for participatory governance, heavy-handed regulation risks undermining its democratic potential. It therefore recommends that Nigeria adopt transparent, rights-respecting, and consultative regulatory frameworks, strengthen institutional capacity for digital governance, and sustain continuous dialogue with citizens to balance policy objectives with democratic freedoms.*

Keywords: *Social media, Governance, Government policy, Government regulation, Policy instruments, Civic engagement.*

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1. Introduction

In contemporary governance, social media has emerged as a dominant arena for public discourse, civic engagement, and political mobilisation. Platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp have transformed the ways citizens interact with governments, engage public institutions, and express opinions on public policy. The digital revolution has reconfigured governance practices globally by blurring traditional boundaries between state actors and citizens (Janssen & Estevez, 2024; Yang et al., 2024). As a result, social media has become central to political communication, advocacy, and policy debates in both established and emerging democracies.

What initially functioned primarily as a medium for social interaction and entertainment has evolved into a multifaceted infrastructure shaping politics, business, culture, and collective action (Hang, 2024). In governance terms, social media has democratised the production and dissemination of information, allowing citizens to bypass traditional gatekeepers such as state-controlled media and political elites (Castells, 2012). This transformation has significantly altered state-society relations by amplifying citizen voices and expanding the public sphere.

Historically, communication technologies have always influenced governance dynamics. Radio and print media played key roles in policy dissemination and political mobilisation during the colonial and postcolonial periods, while electronic media expanded state communication capacities in the late twentieth century (Okon, 2021; Jones, 2023). Social media, however, represents a distinct shift due to its interactive, decentralised, and user-driven nature (Omar & Ondimu, 2024). These characteristics enable real-time engagement and collective mobilisation on a scale previously unattainable.

In Nigeria, the rapid expansion of social media use has been driven by increased internet penetration, smartphone accessibility, and mobile broadband expansion. This has intensified public participation in national debates and enhanced the visibility of citizen grievances within policy discourse (Adeniran, 2021). Thus, Nigeria provides a particularly important context for examining the relationship between governance, social media and government policy. This is because of the country's expanding digital environment, as well as its complex federal political structure. For instance, as of October 2025, Nigeria had approximately 109 million internet users. This represents an internet penetration rate of 45.5 per cent, while social-media user identities stood at about 47.8 million, which is approximately 20.0 per cent of the country's population (DataReportal, 2026). Similarly, the data from the Nigerian Communications

Commission indicate that broadband subscriptions increased from about 96.3 million as of December 2024 to more than 109.6 million as of December 2025. This reflects the continuing expansion of digital connectivity in the country (NCC, 2026). This notwithstanding, Nigeria's digital transformation should be understood within a broader global context of expanding but uneven internet access (ITU, 2025). Politically, however, Nigeria operates a federal structure comprising the Federal Government, 36 states and 774 Local Government Areas, with governmental responsibilities distributed across these levels (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999). This multi-level structure matters for understanding the governance implications of social media, as digital platforms provide channels through which citizens interact with, scrutinise, and make demands upon public institutions at different levels of government.

Social media occupies a dual position in Nigeria's governance landscape; it functions as an instrument of citizen empowerment and as a source of political tension. On the one hand, digital platforms have enabled citizens, civil society organisations, and particularly youth groups to engage policymakers, demand accountability, and mobilise around reform-oriented causes. This was vividly demonstrated during the #EndSARS movement of 2020, when online mobilisation translated into nationwide protests against police brutality and governance failures (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). On the other hand, social media has been associated with the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and cyber harassment, raising concerns about national security, social cohesion, and public order (Chen et al., 2023).

In response to these perceived risks, the Nigerian government has increasingly pursued regulatory interventions aimed at managing online discourse. Legislative proposals such as the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill (2019), alongside administrative measures and platform restrictions, including the 2021 Twitter suspension, have generated intense debate about digital rights, democratic governance, and the appropriate scope of state regulation. These developments raise fundamental questions about how governments can regulate digital spaces without undermining freedom of expression and participatory governance.

Against this backdrop, this study examines the interaction between social media, governance, and government policy in Nigeria. Specifically, the study:

1. Analyses the policy, legal, and regulatory instruments employed by the Nigerian state to govern social media and digital communication;

2. Examine how social media has reshaped state-citizen relations through selected governance and policy episodes in Nigeria; and
3. Assess the implications of social media and its regulation for democratic norms, public trust, governance, and policy outcomes in Nigeria.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What policy, legal, and regulatory instruments have the Nigerian state employed to govern social media and digital communication?
2. In what ways has social media reshaped state-citizen relations through selected governance and policy episodes in Nigeria?
3. What are the implications of social media and its regulation for democratic norms, public trust, governance, and policy outcomes in Nigeria?

2. Conceptual framework: Social media, digital governance and democratic accountability

This study is anchored in the concept of governance as the interaction between state institutions, non-state actors, and citizens in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of public policy (Rhodes, 1996; Kooiman, 2003). Governance extends beyond formal government authority to include processes of accountability, participation, transparency, and legitimacy, reflecting both institutional arrangements and societal norms that shape decision-making and policy outcomes (Stoker, 1998; Bevir, 2013). Within this framework, social media represents a critical infrastructure of contemporary governance, influencing how power is exercised, contested, and negotiated in the public sphere (Castells, 2012).

Digital governance refers to the application of digital technologies in governing processes, including policy communication, service delivery, citizen engagement, and regulation of digital spaces (Lindgren & Jansson, 2013; Janssen & Estevez, 2024). Social media constitutes a core component of digital governance because it facilitates horizontal communication among citizens, enabling peer-to-peer exchanges, collective action, and information sharing, while also allowing vertical interaction between citizens and the state, such as direct engagement with policymakers, service feedback, and policy advocacy (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). Its governance significance lies in its capacity to expand civic space, enhance transparency, and democratise information, while simultaneously challenging state control over information flows and authority (Feldstein, 2021; Diamond, 2019).

Democratic accountability, in this context, relates to the ability of citizens to monitor government actions, demand justification, and sanction misconduct through both formal mechanisms, which may include elections, audits, and legal oversight. Or informal mechanisms, including public protests, social media campaigns, and media scrutiny (Schedler, 1999; Mechkova & Wilson, 2022). Social media enhances accountability by increasing transparency, amplifying marginalised voices, and enabling collective scrutiny of state performance (Barberá, 2020). However, it also complicates governance by facilitating the rapid spread of disinformation, polarisation, and transnational influence, which can undermine institutional trust and distort public debate (Gorwa, 2019; Helberger et al., 2022). The regulatory responses of the state, therefore, reflect broader tensions between authority, rights, and legitimacy in the digital age, illustrating the challenge of balancing public order with democratic freedoms in highly networked societies (Suzor, 2016; Brennan Center for Justice, 2024).

3. Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design and was based on a case study approach to analyse the relationship between and among social media, governance, and government policy in Nigeria. A qualitative case study is well thought-out and appropriate, as the study is concerned not primarily with measuring the frequency or magnitude of social-media use, but with understanding the meanings, processes, institutional responses, as well as governance consequences associated with significant episodes of digital political interaction.

Two cases, the #EndSARS movement of 2020 and the Federal Government's suspension of Twitter (now X) in 2021, were purposively selected. The two cases were selected using four principal criteria. Firstly, each case represented a significant episode in the interaction between social media and government in Nigeria. Secondly, both cases involved substantial interaction among citizens, state institutions, and digital platforms; in that way, they provided evidence for examining changing state-citizen relations. Thirdly, the selected cases generated significant governmental policy and regulatory responses, thus making them suitable for analysing the use of state instruments in regulating digital communication and online political activity. And, fourthly, both cases generated substantial documentary, media, civil-society, and scholarly materials, making it possible to undertake a sufficiently rich analysis using secondary sources.

The selection of these cases also allows analytical comparison, while the #EndSARS case illustrates the use of social media primarily as a mechanism for civic mobilisation, collective

expression, agenda-setting, and demands for governmental accountability, the Twitter suspension illustrates the state's regulatory response to a major digital communication platform and raises questions concerning freedom of expression, access to information, digital rights, and the limits of governmental regulatory authority. Therefore, the study does not claim that these cases exhaust the range of social-media-related governance experiences in Nigeria; rather, they are treated as information-rich cases through which broader governance and policy issues can be examined.

Although the #EndSARS movement and the 2021 Twitter suspension constitute the two principal cases analysed in the study, subsequent policy and regulatory developments are examined as contextual developments for assessing the continuing relevance and evolution of the governance issues revealed by the cases.

The study relied exclusively on secondary data, comprising government policy documents, official statements and directives, legislative and regulatory documents, reports of governmental and regulatory institutions, academic publications, and reputable national and international media reports. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the two cases. The data were analysed thematically, focusing on patterns of civic mobilisation, government policy responses, regulatory instruments, and implications for democratic governance.

The study recognises limitations associated with its reliance on secondary sources and case-study analysis. For instance, the exclusive use of secondary data means that the study does not capture the direct perceptions and experiences of citizens, government officials, social-media users, or other stakeholders through interviews, focus groups, or surveys. Thus, the study does not claim to provide a comprehensive representation of all online interactions associated with the two cases. Instead, it focuses on documented evidence available through credible secondary sources. The purposive selection of two high-profile cases limits the universality of the findings in a statistical sense; thus, the study sought analytical rather than statistical generalisation.

Despite the methodology limitations, the combination of purposive case selection, multiple documentary sources, thematic analysis, and cross-source comparison provides an appropriate methodological basis for examining the governance and policy implications of social media in Nigeria.

4. Government regulation of social media in Nigeria: Policy instruments and governance implications

Social media platforms have become integral to Nigeria's public sphere, influencing political communication, social mobilisation, and information dissemination. However, their growing significance has also heightened government concerns about misinformation, hate speech, and content capable of inciting violence or undermining public order. In response, the Nigerian government has deployed a range of policy instruments to regulate digital spaces.

Legislative initiatives have included proposals such as the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill (2019), commonly referred to as the Social Media Bill, which sought to criminalise the spread of false information online. Although the bill faced widespread criticism and did not become law, it signalled the state's regulatory intent. Administrative instruments have also featured prominently, notably the National Information Technology Development Agency's (NITDA) Code of Practice for Interactive Computer Service Platforms (2022), which introduced content moderation, registration, and local presence requirements for digital platforms.

Beyond formal regulatory frameworks, the government has employed coercive measures, most notably the indefinite suspension of Twitter in June 2021. This action followed the platform's deletion of a tweet by President Muhammadu Buhari for violating Twitter's policy on abusive behaviour. The suspension disrupted communication for millions of users, affected businesses reliant on the platform, and drew condemnation from international actors, highlighting the reputational and economic costs of heavy-handed digital regulation (Amnesty International, 2021).

The eventual lifting of the ban, following negotiations that required Twitter to establish a legal entity in Nigeria, illustrates a pattern of ad hoc enforcement followed by negotiated settlements rather than judicial resolution. This episode underscores the importance of clear legal frameworks, due process, and institutional capacity in digital governance. It also reveals how executive discretion can substitute for formal regulation in weak institutional contexts, raising concerns about predictability, accountability, and the rule of law.

5. Social media, governance, and policy responses: #Endsars and the Twitter suspension

The #EndSARS movement and the Twitter suspension highlight the intricate relationship between social media, governance, and policy-making in Nigeria. Both cases stress the urgent

need for digital governance frameworks that balance the protection of citizen rights with the legitimate interests of the state. This section, therefore, focuses on these two significant events that prompted policy responses from the Nigerian government.

The #EndSARS Movement

The #EndSARS movement of October 2020 represents one of the most significant instances of digitally mediated civic activism in Nigeria. Originating as a youth-led online campaign against police brutality by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the movement rapidly evolved into a nationwide protest that combined online mobilisation with offline demonstrations. Social media platforms served as organisational hubs, facilitating coordination, fundraising, documentation of abuses, and global amplification of citizen grievances.

Digital platforms enabled protesters to aggregate testimonies, disseminate visual evidence of police misconduct, and bypass traditional institutional channels that were widely perceived as ineffective. The movement compelled the government to respond swiftly, including the announcement of SARS disbandment, thereby demonstrating the capacity of social media to exert political pressure and shape policy outcomes. At the same time, the protests exposed enduring tensions between civic freedom, state authority, and information control in Nigeria's governance system.

The Twitter Suspension

In contrast, the Twitter suspension of June 2021 illustrates the state's coercive response to perceived challenges posed by digital platforms. The government justified the suspension on grounds of national security and corporate integrity, arguing that the platform was being used to undermine Nigeria's stability (Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, 2021). Critics, however, interpreted the action as retaliatory and authoritarian, reflecting official discomfort with social media's agenda-setting power.

The suspension disrupted civic communication, media operations, and digital commerce, while also triggering debates about sovereignty, platform governance, and freedom of expression. It highlighted how restrictive regulatory measures can erode public trust, constrain civic space, and signal tendencies toward digital authoritarianism. Together, the #EndSARS movement and the Twitter suspension illustrate contrasting yet interconnected dimensions of social media's role in governance: empowerment through mobilisation and repression through regulation.

5. Policy implications and governance tensions

Social media functions as a double-edged sword in governance, simultaneously enabling participation and generating regulatory challenges. Its governance implications in Nigeria can be examined across several interrelated domains.

Public Policy Implementation and Crisis Management

Social media enables real-time interaction between policymakers and citizens, facilitating more transparent and participatory policy implementation (Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). During crises, platforms allow governments to rapidly disseminate information, gauge public sentiment, and adjust responses accordingly. However, these benefits are counterbalanced by the risks of misinformation, rumour proliferation, and poorly managed engagement, which can distort policy outcomes and erode government legitimacy. Regulatory interventions perceived as arbitrary or politically motivated exacerbate these risks, undermining public trust and the effectiveness of policy implementation.

Democratic Accountability and Civic Space

Digital platforms expand the civic space by empowering citizens, journalists, and civil society organisations to monitor government performance, mobilise collective action, and demand accountability (Diamond, 2019; Mechkova & Wilson, 2022). Movements such as #EndSARS illustrate how online activism can catalyse political pressure and policy attention. Yet, governance responses framed around national security, such as platform suspensions or extensive monitoring, may result in digital repression and surveillance, narrowing civic space and weakening democratic accountability (Feldstein, 2021). This tension underscores the delicate balance between ensuring security and upholding citizen freedoms in digital governance.

Rule of Law and Institutional Capacity

The effectiveness of digital governance is contingent upon strong institutions and adherence to the rule of law. When enforcement powers are broad and unchecked, there is a risk of excessive executive discretion, arbitrary decisions, and unpredictability in legal outcomes (Suzor, 2016; Taylor, 2021). Strengthening institutional capacity, through independent regulatory bodies, transparent procedures, and judicial oversight, is therefore essential to harness social media's democratic potential rather than using it as a tool of suppression.

Platform Behaviour and Information Ecosystems

Social media governance is also shaped by the policies and algorithmic designs of the platforms themselves, which influence information flows and public discourse (Gorwa, 2019). Regulatory pressures can encourage platforms to improve transparency, responsiveness, and accountability, but excessive intervention may lead to over-moderation, reducing pluralism and the diversity of voices in public debate. Balancing regulatory oversight with platform autonomy remains a key challenge for policymakers aiming to maintain open yet accountable digital spaces.

Economic and Innovation Impacts

Beyond political and social implications, social media plays a significant role in economic development. It facilitates entrepreneurship, innovation, and market access, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (Appel et al., 2020). Heavy-handed regulation, arbitrary platform shutdowns, or prolonged bans disrupt these economic activities, deter investment, and weaken the digital ecosystem. Policymakers must therefore weigh the economic costs of restrictive digital governance against security or regulatory objectives.

6. Recent developments in Nigeria's digital governance and policy environment

The governance implications of social media in Nigeria have continued to evolve beyond the #EndSARS movement and the 2021 suspension of Twitter. Subsequent developments have indicated a gradual broadening of the state's approach from individual regulatory interventions to a more comprehensive digital-governance framework. Thus, a comprehensive digital-governance framework encompasses data protection, privacy, digital rights, platform governance, digital infrastructure, as well as responsible use of digital technologies. This evolution is reflected in the institutionalisation of data-protection regulation, the implementation of broader digital-economy strategies, and the continuing development of regulatory frameworks for emerging digital technologies (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2026; National Information Technology Development Agency, 2020; Nigeria Data Protection Commission, 2026).

A major development was the enactment of the Nigeria Data Protection Act, 2023. It established a statutory framework for the protection of personal data and the regulation of data processing in Nigeria. The Act also established the Nigeria Data Protection Commission as the principal institutional mechanism for overseeing and enforcing data-protection standards. The Commission's mandate includes safeguarding the rights of natural persons to data privacy,

promoting secure and privacy-conscious data-processing practices, and strengthening the legal foundations of Nigeria's digital economy through the trusted use of personal data (Nigeria Data Protection Commission, 2023). Thus, the emergence of this framework represents an important development in Nigeria's digital-governance architecture. This is because it places privacy, data security, accountability, and lawful data processing more explicitly within the institutional relationship between citizens, government institutions, businesses, and digital platforms. The Act further provides mechanisms for data-subject rights and remedies, thereby linking digital governance with broader questions of accountability and public trust (Nigeria Data Protection Commission, 2026).

The post-ban evolution of platform-state relations also provides an important extension of the analysis. Following the 2021 suspension of Twitter in Nigeria, access was restored in January 2022. This was as a result of negotiations between the platform and the Nigerian government and the fulfilment of conditions regarding the platform's operations in Nigeria. The episode demonstrated that relations between governments and global digital platforms increasingly involve questions of regulatory compliance, national sovereignty, freedom of expression, content governance, and the responsibilities of technology companies. The Nigerian experience, therefore, illustrates a broader governance dilemma. While governments may have legitimate interests in addressing harmful content, public order, national security, and regulatory compliance, measures that substantially restrict access to communication platforms can also affect citizens' opportunities for expression, access to information, association, and political participation. The Twitter episode, consequently, remains significant as an illustration of the tension between governmental regulatory authority and the protection of democratic digital spaces.

More recent developments further demonstrate that digital governance in Nigeria is becoming increasingly institutionalised. The National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy established a broad policy framework organised around eight pillars, including developmental regulation, digital literacy and skills, infrastructure, digital services, digital society and emerging technologies, and indigenous content development (National Information Technology Development Agency, 2020). This policy orientation has subsequently been complemented by institutional and regulatory initiatives involving the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), the Nigeria Data Protection Commission (NDPC), the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), and the Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy. NITDA's Strategic Roadmap and Action Plan (SRAP 2.0),

2024-2027, for example, emphasises digital inclusion, regulatory frameworks, innovation, cybersecurity, and the development of Nigeria's digital economy (National Information Technology Development Agency, 2024). In 2026, the Federal Government also announced a National Digital Cloud Policy, designed to provide a framework for cloud computing and data infrastructure while addressing government digital transformation, data security, and digital sovereignty (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2026).

The regulatory landscape has consequently moved beyond the exceptional use of platform restrictions toward a more differentiated system involving legislation, specialised regulatory institutions, policy frameworks, compliance mechanisms, and sectoral oversight. This does not necessarily mean that restrictive approaches have disappeared; rather, it suggests that Nigeria's digital-governance model increasingly combines regulation, institutional coordination, digital-development policies, and rights protection. The continuing challenge is to ensure that these instruments are transparent, proportionate, legally grounded, subject to appropriate institutional oversight, and consistent with democratic principles. The Federal Ministry's 2026 directive for a harmonised approach to the regulation of internet platforms and online intermediaries illustrates the continuing need to coordinate the mandates of institutions such as NITDA, the NCC, and the NDPC as digital technologies increasingly cut across traditional regulatory boundaries (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2026).

These developments since 2021, therefore, reinforce rather than diminish the significance of the #EndSARS and Twitter cases. The former demonstrated the capacity of social media to facilitate large-scale civic mobilisation, collective expression, agenda-setting, and demands for governmental accountability, while the latter revealed the capacity of the state to exercise regulatory authority over digital communication. The subsequent expansion of data-protection institutions and broader digital-governance frameworks suggests that the central policy challenge has moved beyond the question of whether governments should regulate digital platforms to the more complex question of how digital platforms can be governed in ways that protect privacy, democratic participation, freedom of expression, public trust, and meaningful state-citizen engagement while also addressing legitimate concerns relating to security, harmful content, and regulatory compliance. The continuing evolution of Nigeria's digital-governance framework, therefore, underscores the need for a balanced regulatory approach that recognises both the democratic potential of social media and the legitimate responsibilities of the state in the digital sphere.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This study demonstrates that social media has profoundly reshaped governance in Nigeria by expanding civic engagement, political mobilisation, and public discourse. The #EndSARS movement illustrates how digital platforms can empower citizens to demand accountability and influence policy, while the Twitter suspension reveals the risks associated with coercive regulation and executive overreach.

While social media introduces governance challenges such as misinformation and hate speech, the Nigerian government's regulatory responses have exposed gaps in institutional capacity, adherence to the rule of law, and trust between the state and citizens. Excessive or heavy-handed regulation undermines freedom of expression, narrows civic space, and erodes democratic legitimacy.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

The Nigerian government should adopt transparent, proportionate, rights-respecting, and consultative digital-regulation frameworks in order to balance legitimate government interests with freedom of expression, access to information, and civic participation.

The government should also strengthen the capacity, as well as coordination of digital-governance institutions, clarify institutional mandates, improve inter-agency collaboration, and develop specialised technical and regulatory expertise.

Furthermore, the government should ensure due process, vis-à-vis applying appropriate judicial or independent oversight for decisions that considerably restrict access to digital platforms, with clear legal authority, publicly stated reasons, and avenues for review and redress.

Lastly, the government should institutionalise continuous state-citizen and state-platform dialogue through public consultations, digital feedback devices, and multi-stakeholder engagement on major digital policies. And strengthen the implementation of data-protection and privacy safeguards, specifically under the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023, to improve accountability and public confidence in digital governance.

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