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Public Perceptions on Internet Privacy and Freedom of Expression

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ABSTRACT

Privacy rights and freedom of expression are core values in any democratic society. With the advent of social media, the convergence of thoughts or views has become easy. There are existing legislations that violates users' privacy rights and freedom of expression in Nigeria. A descriptive survey research design was used to analyse the online survey that was conducted. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations are made to the Nigeria government on how to ensure internet control and social media surveillance are within defined established legal provisions that respect the fundamental privacy rights of the citizens.

Keywords: Social media surveillance, Internet freedom of expression, Privacy, Public perception, Social media



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1. INTRODUCTION

The internet is a fundamental component of economic, social and political life around the world. It provides boundless space through which communication, business, education, entertainment, etc takes place on global network. The internet has made the world a global village by providing amongst others, an interface for the operation of social media (Azinge, 2012). In Nigeria with an estimated population of 182million (National Population Commission, 2017), over 92million Nigerians have Internet access through mobile telecommunications networks only compared with 57.7million in 2014 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016).

According to UNESCO (2016) the internet provides new abilities to create, and edit information content, which creates enabling environment for realising human integrity and capacity; sustaining freedoms such as freedom of association and expression mostly via social media. With the advent of social media; such as, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Blog, Whatsup, BBM, amongst others, the convergence of thoughts or views has become easy.

The growing population of Internet users and to alleged crimes of hate speeches and the spread of misinformation online, Nigerian government proposed a number of measures to monitor and control the use of social media and the Internet. However, recent conversations about Internet privacy, rights and freedom of expression in Nigeria is limited as a result of inadequate information about Nigerians online behaviour as well as their perceptions of the applications and limitations of the Internet in their daily lives, politics and society. This study seeks to establish the public perception on issues related to internet freedom, privacy rights and freedom of expression in Nigeria.

2. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Privacy rights and freedom of expression are core values in any democratic society. Section 37 of the 1999 constitution guarantees and protects privacy rights even on communication platforms and Section 39 of the 1999 constitution guarantees and protects freedom of expression in Nigeria. However, the privacy rights and freedom of expression are not free from restriction or limitation. Section 45 of the 1999 constitution maintains that, in the interest of defence, public safety, public order, public morality or public health; laws can be enacted to restrict privacy rights and freedom of expression.

Babajide and Odumesi (2016) revealed that, there are existing legislations that violates users' privacy rights and freedom of expression in Nigeria. They are; Section 38 of Nigeria Cybercrime Act 2015, Nigeria National Cybersecurity Policy and Strategy, NITDA Act 2007, Sections 146 and 147 of the Nigeria Communications Commission Act 2003, The Part 1 of the draft lawful interception of communications regulation by Nigeria Communications Commission Act 2003, , Guidelines for the provision of internet service published in pursuant to Section 70(2) of the Nigeria Communications Commission Act 2003, Terrorism Prevention (Amendment) Act 2013 and Mobile Number Portability regulation 2013 by Nigeria Communications Commission.

Therefore, this study intends to understand the public opinion toward issues related to internet freedom, privacy rights and freedom of expression in Nigeria.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to investigate public perception on internet freedom of expression, privacy, trust and security in Nigeria.

The specific objectives are as follows:

1. To understand public perception towards internet censorship and policy making.
2. To examine internet users' behaviours and perceptions on internet rights and freedom.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. An online survey via Google Forms was conducted from March 27, 2017 to June 30, 2017 with twenty one questions grouped into four respective sections in order to address the research questions. Section A measured the socio demographic variables of the participants.

Section B measured how the participants gain access to the internet, frequency of internet access and perceived benefits of internet use. Section C measured the social media use, free expression on social media platforms, perceptions of social media freedom of expression and perceptions on internet freedom of expression. Section D measured the perceptions of internet control and surveillance and perceptions of internet roles in Nigeria politics. The link to the survey was distributed via social networks.

The research questions for the study are as follows:

1. How do Nigerians use the internet?
2. What are the perceptions of Nigerians with respect to social media freedom of expression?
3. What are the perceptions of Nigerians with respect to internet control and surveillance?
4. What roles does internet play on online political engagement in Nigeria?

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This study aimed at investigating public perceptions on internet freedom of expression, privacy, trust and security in Nigeria.

Response Data

The study's sample size for analysis consisted of 1391 drawn from the survey. The data obtained was processed and presented in Table 1:

Table 1: Response data

Response rate	N	%
Usable response	1269	91
Unusable response	122	9
Total	1391	100

Survey Demographics

The analysed data from the questionnaire shows that male were 68% and female 32% having the following level of education; graduate 9%, bachelor 57%, diploma 20% and SSCE 8%. Participants are mostly employed with 55%, self employed 22%, student 16% and unemployed 7%. Participants in the age group of 26 - 35 years were the highest with 41%, with 16 - 25 years as 17%, 36 - 45 years 34% and 46 years - Above as 8%.

Access to Internet

From the usable response, 1241 participants responded on desktop computer usage. Majority of the participants 52% (641) do not use this device to access the internet with. 29% (357) reported that, they occasionally use this device to access the internet and 19% (243) indicated that, smartphone is their preferred device for accessing the internet. This is the least means of accessing the internet among the participants. On the use of laptop to access the internet, 1249 participants responded. 49% (618) of the participants preferred to access the internet with laptop. 47% (584) occasionally use this device to access the internet and 4% (47) do not use this device to access the internet. On the use of smartphone to access the internet, 1238 participants responded. 76% (937) of the participants preferred to access the internet with smartphone. 21% (265) occasionally use this device to access the internet and 3% (36) do not use this device to access the internet. However, this is the most means of accessing the internet among the participants.

On the use of tablet to access the internet, 1221 participants responded. 39% (427) of the participants preferred to access the internet with tablet. 30% (389) occasionally use this device to access the internet and 31% (405) do not use this device to access the internet.

Frequency of Internet Access

Majority of the survey participants (89%) indicated that, they access the internet daily, 6% access the internet weekly and 5% reported accessing the internet occasionally.

Perceived Benefits of Internet Use

Table 2 presented how Nigerians use the internet. The result indicated that, participants find the internet useful and productive with connecting with friends/family (96%), carrying out online financial transactions (94%), contributing to academic/research growth (83%), contributing to career and professional development (83%), general news (82%) and entertainment (77%).

Table 2: Perceived Benefits of Internet Use

Question		N	%
Does the internet usage help you stay connected with friends and family?	Yes	1192	96
	No	77	4
Total		1269	100
Question		N	%
Does the internet usage provide you with entertainment?	Yes	979	77
	No	272	21
Total		1251	100
Question		N	%
Does the internet usage provide you with general news?	Yes	961	82
	No	205	18
Total		1166	100
Question		N	%
Does the internet usage contribute to your academic/research growth?	Yes	1037	83
	No	212	17
Total		1249	100
Question		N	%
Does the internet usage contribute to your career and professional development?	Yes	998	83
	No	203	17
Total		1201	100
Question		N	%
Does the internet usage make it easy to carry out online financial transactions?	Yes	1183	94
	No	69	6
Total		1252	100

Social Media Use

Most of the participants indicated holding accounts on social media platforms (78%). 98% suggested having a Facebook account and 88% reported to always be on the platform. It is still the most popular and used social media platform among the participants. 73% specified having an Instagram account with 62% reported to always be on the platform. This is also a popular social media platform among the participants. 74% indicated having a LinkedIn account with 39% reported to once or twice daily be on the platform. This is the least frequently used social media platform among the participants. 77% specified having a Snapchat account with 48% reported to always be on the platform. 76% showed having a Twitter account with 58% reported to always be on the platform. 68% indicated having a Youtube account with 48% reported to always be on the platform.

Table 3: Social Media Use

	Facebook		Instagram		LinkedIn		Snapchat		Twitter		Youtube	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Never/No account	19	1	341	27	319	26	281	23	298	24	402	32
Once or twice daily	74	6	91	7	489	39	299	24	156	13	208	17
Continuously	1098	88	769	62	157	13	601	48	723	58	597	48
Weekly	26	2	31	3	181	15	46	4	47	4	26	2
Monthly	37	3	17	1	92	7	10	1	17	1	8	1
Total	1254	100	1249	100	1238	100	1237	100	1241	100	1241	100

Free Expression on Social Media

The survey explores fundamental questions related to freedom of expression on social media platforms. From Table 4, 56% of the participants indicated that, they shared links on socio-economic and political issues always and 23% shared once or twice daily. 58% comments online on socio-economic and political issues always and 24% shared once or twice daily. This implies that, the participants were willing to share and comments on socio-economic and political issues. The survey also explored the frequency with which participants shared and comments on ethnic, tribe and religious issues. 37% of the participants indicated that, they never shared links on ethnic, tribe and religious issues, 24% of respondents share such links once or twice daily and 21% do that always. 40% of the participants maintained that, they never comment on ethnic, tribe and religious issues online, 29% once or twice daily and 20% always. This implies that, most of the participants are not willing to share and comment on ethnic, tribe and religious issues.

Table 4: Free Expression on Social Media Platforms

	Post or share links on socio-economic and political issues		Post or share links on ethnic, tribe and religious issues		Post your comments on socio-economic and political issues		Post your comments on ethnic, tribe and religious issues	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Never	101	8	461	37	108	9	501	40
Once or twice daily	289	23	305	24	301	24	362	29
Continuously	691	56	257	21	727	58	248	20
Weekly	103	8	66	5	55	4	26	2
Monthly	65	5	160	13	58	5	112	9
Total	1249	100	1249	100	1249	100	1249	100

Perceptions of Social Media Freedom of Expression

The survey explored the participants’ perception of social media freedom in expressing their opinions without fear. From Table 5, the majority of the participants (78%) and (74%) specified that, they freely share links and comments on socio-economic/political issues respectively. However, 53% and 58% of the participants are not free to share links and comment on ethnic, tribe and religious issues respectively.

Table 5: Perceptions of Social Media Freedom of Expression without fear

	Post or share links on socio-economic and political issues		Post or share links on ethnic, tribe and religious issues		Post your comments on socio-economic and political issues		Post your comments on ethnic, tribe and religious issues	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very fearful	96	8	481	38	102	8	526	42
Relatively fearful	79	6	186	15	125	10	199	16
Indifferent	106	8	59	5	99	8	66	5
Relatively free	673	54	308	25	634	51	237	19
Very free	295	24	215	17	289	23	221	18
Total	1249	100	1249	100	1249	100	1249	100

Perceptions of Internet Freedom of Expression

In examining the perceptions of internet freedom of expression, Table 6 illustrates that 50% of the participants are feeling or showing fear in expressing their opinions online.

Table 6: Perceptions of Internet Freedom of Expression

	N	%
Very fearful	183	15
Relatively fearful	429	35
Indifferent	81	6
Relatively free	383	31
Very free	165	13
Total	1241	100

From Table 5 and Table 6, the findings point to the government position on hate speech control measures most especially among online users. Several sections of the Nigerian Laws such as Sections 59-60, 373-381 of the Criminal Code Act; Sections 417-418 of the Penal Code Act; Section 95 of the Electoral Act 2010 and Sections 24 and 26 of the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention ETC) Act 2015, offences caused by reckless publications which include criminal intimidation, racist and xenophobic, false publication, rumour or report which may disturb public peace attracts penalties.

Perceptions of Internet Control and Surveillance

Despite Nigerian government monitoring of social media platforms against hate speeches, 66% of the participants specified that, they are willing to express socio-political opinions online, 47% of the respondents were not willing to express ethnic, tribe and religious opinions online with 14% not sure they will. 42% of the respondents indicated their willingness to express national security opinions online and 40% were willing to access general information online.

Table 7: Perceptions of Internet Control and Surveillance

	Willing to express socio-economic and political opinions online		Willing to express ethnic, tribe and religious opinions online		Willing to express national security opinions online		Willing to access general information online	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
No	256	21	581	47	429	35	481	39
Not sure	161	13	181	14	289	23	258	21
Yes	824	66	479	39	523	42	502	40
Total	1241	100	1241	100	1241	100	1241	100

Perceptions of Internet's Role in Nigeria Politics

From Table 8, 59% of the participants specified that the internet impact positively in the society, 65% indicated that the internet plays positive role in politics, while 46% of the respondents agreed that the internet plays positive role in national security and 67 indicated that it increases political participation among Nigerian citizens.

Table 8: Perceptions of Internet's Role in Nigeria Politics

	Internet plays positive/negative role in the society		Internet plays positive/negative role in politics		Internet plays positive/negative role in national security		Internet Increases political participation	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Very negative	84	7	87	7	176	14	91	7
Relatively negative	119	10	128	10	326	26	237	19
Indifferent	296	24	218	18	171	14	87	7
Relatively positive	413	33	526	42	301	24	547	44
Very positive	329	26	282	23	267	22	279	23
Total	1241	100	1241	100	1241	100	1241	100

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated public perceptions on internet freedom of expression, privacy, trust and security in Nigeria. The findings revealed that, the majority of the participants freely share links and comments on socio-economic/political issues online. However, majority of the participants do not feel free to share links and comment on ethnic, tribe and religious issues. These findings point to the government position on hate speech control measures most especially among online users. In Nigerian laws, such as Sections 59-60, 373-381 of the Criminal Code Act; Sections 417-418 of the Penal Code Act; Section 95 of the Electoral Act 2010 and Sections 24 and 26 of the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention ETC) Act 2015, offences caused by reckless publications which include criminal intimidation, racist and xenophobic, false publication, rumour or report which may disturb public peace attracts penalties.

The finding further revealed that, despite the participants being aware that the government is monitoring social media against hate speeches, majority of the participants are willing to express socio-political opinions, national security opinions online and willing to access general information online, while majority not willing to express ethnic, tribe and religious opinions online. Furthermore, the findings revealed that, the participants acknowledge the positive impact internet has on the society, politics, national security and how it increases political participation among the Nigeria citizens.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers suggest the following:

1. The government must ensure social media surveillance is within defined established legal provisions that respect the fundamental privacy rights of the citizens.
2. There is a need for government to ensure passage of data privacy and lawful interception laws that will define citizens' fundamental privacy rights and the legal framework around internet regulation and social media surveillance.
3. There is need to specifically outline provisions for lawful interception in ensuring a safer territorial sovereignty without threatening the freedom of citizens' constitutional right to communicate online freely.

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