





Research Article/ Media Studies

Media Regulation in Nigeria's Digital Age: A Systematic Review of Policy Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to examine media regulations in the digital era in Nigeria, focusing on their implications for free expression. The research was motivated by the increasing attempts by the Nigerian government to regulate digital platforms, particularly social media, through controversial bills such as the "Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019" and the "National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill." These legislative efforts have sparked widespread concerns

about the potential infringement on citizens' rights to free speech. The general objective of the study was to explore existing literature to ascertain the balance between digital media regulation and the protection of fundamental rights in Nigeria's evolving digital landscape. The study is based on a systematic literature review, relying on secondary data sources, including journal articles, online resources, and reports. The findings revealed a significant tension between the government's desire to regulate harmful content and the risk of suppressing free expression. It was revealed that vague and broad provisions in the proposed legislation could be exploited to target critics and stifle dissent. The study concludes that while there is a need for regulation to address misinformation and hate speech, such measures must be transparent, participatory, and aligned with the global best practices to prevent the erosion of democratic principles. The key recommendation for Nigeria is to develop a balanced regulatory framework that protects both public order and the right to free expression.

KEYWORDS: Digital media, digital platforms, free expression, media regulation

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INTRODUCTION

Media regulation is an age-long tool deployed by the authority to censor the press in society in a bid to ensure there is sanity in the pieces of information that

often find their way to the audience members. At other times, it could be to ensure that anti-regime or government news items are not allowed to spread unchallenged or to ensure the press or media do not act in ways that promote abuses of their channels. In Nigeria, several attempts have been made to regulate the traditional media through several codes and laws designed to ensure the media is held accountable for any type of information they allow for dissemination, whether on radio's airwaves, television screen, or on the pages of newspapers and magazines, and very recently in the linear and non-linear internet spaces.

Traditionally, democratic societies operate on free expression, and any attempt to take such freedoms away amount to derailing from laid down tenets. It is actually the free expression that empowers the people to challenge those they elect to govern them by engaging in constructive and honest conversations aimed at bringing about sanity in the social milieu. To the foregoing, Cruft and Ashton (2022) lent credence with the assertion that democracy transcends the realms of elections to extend to the people's ability to access the requisite resources to engage those in authority on the best form of governance they desire. In modern times, one of such resource to which the citizens have access is the social media (which is an aspect of the much talked-about new media). These new media platforms promote new pathways of government (Couldry, 2007) just as much as they birthed new forms of participation in governance, though the deciding factor in this case is whether they have a modern form of socialisation known as digital media environment socialisation (Ohme, 2018).

Considering the foregoing, therefore, any moment in time legislations are being proposed or introduced to regulate digital media platforms, citizens always get the

feels that the power of free expression will be taken away from them. This is because social media and associated digital media platforms create opportunities for citizens to interact with one another on a horizontal basis, and vertically with their representatives on policies, programmes, and actions of government, including the governance process itself. Since 2015, the national assembly of Nigeria has had time to discuss the issue of digital media regulations through social media bills. On one hand the "Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019" was re-introduced after being thrown out in 2015, and on the other the "National Commission for the Prohibition of Speech Bill" gained attention and was debated on the floor of the national assembly.

On the basis that the two bills when passed into law have all the trappings to hurt rights to free expression, civil society coalition, and Nigerians vehemently opposed them. Jannamike (2021) revealed that civil society organisations (CSOs) are of the position that when passed into law, anti-social media legislations have the capacity to alter democracy in Nigeria. In reality, here lies the challenge because democratic ethos all over the world upholds the right of citizens to freely self-express. Since the twenty-first century digital age thrives on the use of new media technologies and social media in particular, forms of regulation that seek to take away the freedom may be considered obnoxious. Rightly so, Jannamike (2021) averred that the CSOs considered the lawmakers' inability to establish an outright rejection of the bills as obnoxious. Social media are key platforms that provide users the opportunities to learn more with abundant information available across platforms, and also to participate in the political process and governance. By providing access, social media platforms enable voices that were hitherto left out of the loop by traditional media gatekeepers (Cruft & Ashton, 2022). The foregoing is

an importance feature of the digital age and it is part of the issues that makes regulation quite a herculean task.

Digital age is characterised by access and use of digital technologies. This age is also known as the information age, and is part of twenty-first century's historic period in which there is a shift from traditional procedure of doing things to one based on information technology (Tella et al., 2020). Another noteworthy depiction of the digital age was offered by Statti and Torres (2020), that digital age refers to the age wherein personal computers and related technologies are deployed to provide people the opportunities to rapidly share information. Relatedly, the digital age has been described as that which saw technologies gaining popularity as they are deployed to task to ensure efficient processing, transmission, storage, and review of information (Abovyan, as cited in Owusu-Ansah & van der Walt, 2021).

From the foregoing definitions, we can infer that the age where innovation in ICTs led to the production and availability of gadgets that enable smooth communication, wide-range information sharing, and distribution, is known as the digital age and time. It is the disruption (such technologies bring to information-sharing and communication where people are at liberty to share information within split seconds) that makes their use subject of debates both within the academic circles and that of policy makers and government. It is such capacities that provoke the quest and the push for regulations of platforms such as social media as being currently navigated in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa. Therefore, this study systematically reviews existing literature to identify Nigeria's policy and regulatory frameworks for digital media regulation while delving into the challenges, considering its impact on fundamental rights to free expression.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The term "media regulation" is used in its compound form to describe the ways standards are set to prevent all forms of practices that bring media organisations and practice to disrepute, particularly in the estimation of right thinking members of the society. In order to simplify the meaning of this concept, we made attempts to define it in components; media and then regulation, though none of the terms has a universally accepted definition. The media has been defined as mass communication means such as the Internet, television, and smartphones (Ljubetić, Ercegovic, & Vukušić, 2019). According to Gellici (2022), media as a concept is the plural of the word medium which refers to a concept, education, information, medium, and vehicle among others that take place or occur by virtue of transfer of varied types of information to an individual, group of individuals/communities.

Media as a concept cannot be exhaustively reviewed in one piece. However, it is appropriate to consider its meaning from the perspective that breaks its understanding in line with the classification of media. In respect of the foregoing, Perinotto and Soares (2020) identified three types of media namely micromedia, niche media, and mass media; the first being micro media refers to recent development in technologies (mobile, web, and web 2.0), niche media have to do with narrowcasting such as pay-TV or cable television, while the mass media refers to broadcast production and related activities (widely distributed and circulated newspapers and magazines, open TV, and AM/FM radio). To McQuail (2007), media describes all forms/means of public communication especially those known as the mass media (print, radio, television, film in whatever form they are distributed).

The term "regulation" as used in this text refers to rule/principle used to control,

direct or manage an activity, a system or an organisation, and might or might not involve the use of coercive power of law with local, traditional, regional or international scope (Kawalya, 2016). This definition reveals that regulation involves putting in place some principles by which affairs of an organisation or system can be controlled or directed. Strongly related to the foregoing definition is the one put forward by Assay (2020) in which regulation is seen as a means of controlling a process or an activity through the instrumentation of law. The definition points to its use as a tool to guide or direct or control an activity/process. As used in this study, it is about controlling media activities or systems.

According to Jackson (2020), regulations can be seen as social control mechanisms that find a footing in law and can lead to putting in place certain frameworks, laws, policies, and standards. From this definition, we can see that regulation involves putting up frameworks or other legal documents in form of laws, policies, and standards for controlling the activities of humans. Regulations can be legal restrictions and somehow can be linked to government or governing bodies in the broader sense. Evika (2010) noted that legal restrictions put in place by government are what can be referred to as regulations. In this context, they are referred to as restrictions because the knowledge of regulations can either prevent an action or guide same. For example, when a media organisation knows that if a sensitive content is published or aired, there might be sanctions on the basis that a section of the regulations guiding the profession or practice has been violated, such an organisation would tread carefully not to get on the wrong side of the law.

The understanding of the two terms: "media and regulation" provides a fore knowledge to the scholarly positions of the meaning of the concept of media

regulation. Media regulations has been described as the process by which policy goals such as competition, diversity, freedom, and pluralism are established through the instrumentation/application of a range of certain/specific tools often set in a way that they are legally binding (Freedman, 2017). According to McQuail (2007), all formal means by which the activities of media organisations are either directed or restrained encapsulate what media regulation is all about. From the foregoing background knowledge and scholars' definitions of the two separate concepts or terms that make up the concept of media regulation, followed by the definition of the compound term/concept itself, it is appropriate to advance a definition.

Media regulation refers to a body of set rules, standards or policy that seeks to control and direct media organisation in order to ensure infractions are not recorded. It is on the basis of the foregoing that Nogam (2020) expressly averred that media regulation may ensure that libel and defamation are prohibited whilst also making provision to look at national security, blasphemy, obscenity, sedition that are accorded airtime in the media and so on. As used in this study, media regulations refer to rules set to control and direct the media especially in modern societies and how the enforcement of such rules/regulations could infringe on free speech.

We talk of the dominance of digital technologies in the twenty-first century and how things are taking a better shape owing to innovations across the spectrum. The foregoing encapsulates digital age, era, and time in the modern world. According to Geylani (2020), it is an age characterised by the availability and use of computers, and one that saw information transformed into digital format. This definition implies that whenever digital age or period is referenced in a piece, it is actually used to refer to modern era where

information processing in digital forms is made possible and even simplified. As an era, the digital age presents unique experiences where a mass of the people have access to computers, electronic games, mails, the Internet, videos and so many others (Özkan, 2010). In other words, there is widespread use and access to these technologies that provide what can be termed “digital experience.”

The concept of digital age is so wide/broad that it can only be understood by looking at certain buzz words such as big data, cloud technology, automation, InsureTech, and Internet of Things (IoT) among others (Thomas, 2019). Digital age can be seen as an umbrella term that aggregates the aforementioned buzz words that gained popularity in modern era. The term digital era is also known as the informational era (Iuga, 2021), the new media age, the computer age (Tucci, 2014), or simply the information age (Kormoczi, 2020). The digital or information era started with digital revolution (Techopedia, 2017). According to Thomas (2019), the definition of digital revolution offered by Techopedia (2017) captures the meaning of digital age as it has been defined as technological transformation from the age of mechanical and analogue devices to what is obtainable today, where digital technological technologies hold sway; an era or a period that began in the 1980s and can be said to be ongoing at the moment.

However, the foregoing definition is similar to that put forward by Kormoczi (2020), except with the difference in the time the digital age began. According to the researcher, the information age or digital age began in the 1970s with the development of personal computers and thereafter subsequent technology emerged. It is important to restate here that the digital age is still ongoing as more sophistication is achieved in digital technology innovation and production. Tucci (2014) traced the beginning of the

digital age to the works of Claude E. Shannon; an American mathematician also referred to as “the father of information theory” who proposed the encoding of information, stating that it can be encoded quantitatively in series ones and zeros. With the proposition, Shannon demonstrated the possibility of transmitting all information media (which include radio, television, and telephone signals). By extension, Shannon implied the simplicity in codifying all information types, however large, and therefore laid a solid foundation for the possibility of the digitisation of information and technologies (information age).

The digital age typifies everything revolutionary in digital technologies and information processing, sharing and communication in general. Edmondson (2015) noted certain events that better explain the digital age to include typewriters being replaced by the word processor (such as Microsoft Word), mobile and unwired phones replaced the old, wired, fixed telephone, letter writing replaced with the introduction of mobile phone texting, and electronic mails (e-mails), and the decline in the use of the popular traditional postal services and public telephone box. In places where there are traditional postal services, they have also been digitised to fit into the modern informational age and time. Still on the unique possibilities created by the digital or informational age, bills such as electricity and many more can now be paid on mobile devices; diverse computer chips are now available everywhere in household appliances, cars, and other machines aiding humans.

Most significantly, the digital age has created an avenue of super connectivity and thereby enhanced communication between and amongst people in diverse ways. This can be seen in the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, among others to connect with one another. According to

Edmondson (2015), everyone now owns a Facebook account, while public figures attract large followings on Twitter (now X) and other social media platforms. As innovation continues to spring up in the digital age, interactivity is increased and traditional media organisations also operate social media pages where audience members are able to comment on news items and topical issues. Bowd (2016) corroborated this by stating that traditional media organisations saw the need to expand and become a multiplatform enterprise through establishing online social media presence; it was also to ensure they reach wider audience and keep up with the ever-widening innovation in technology. The foregoing still depicts the widening and ever-growing impact of the discoveries in the digital/informational age on the entire communication ecosystem.

Interestingly, technology that created simulcast has been improved as traditional news media now simultaneously stream their programmes on social media platforms. This is to ensure persons who are not able to sit by a television or radio set get to miss nothing as they can catch-up with programming on-the-go. Same applies to the print media with technological innovation providing the means to develop e-copies of daily, weekly or monthly publications readable and accessible on mobile phones, tablet computers, and compactible gadgets. As used in this study, digital age is used to describe the time within which technological advancement aids information and communication, and emphasis is laid on the quest by the government of Nigeria to regulate platforms and ways such could negatively impact on freedom of expression, free expression, or free speech (as the case may be). Relatedly, the term digital age is used interchangeably (throughout this study) with informational or information age, computer age, and modern digital age.

The term stems "free expression" is another important concept in this study and it stems from the term freedom of expression as the two terms can be used interchangeably, just as free speech falls within same word group or category. As part of the fundamental human rights, freedom of expression is one contained, acknowledged or accepted by documents with national or international scope, and guarantees freedom for individuals or group of individuals to hold views and opinions and reserve the choice to express same regardless of creed, cast, ethnicity, nationality, identity or gender (Kundu & Bhuiyan, 2021). We can see through this definition that the right to free expression is part of the much talked-about fundamental human rights, and provisions are documented as application transcends international boundaries.

Free expression is a reflection of one's right to freely express values, beliefs, and feelings through art, writing, or speech (Mathiesen, 2015). According to the American Library Association (2006), the right to free expression is inalienable human right and is the basis for self-governance, cutting across areas such as press freedom, freedom of speech, assembly, and association, and that which has to do with the right of an individual to access information devoid of any form of interference and compromise to personal privacy. Quoting Richard Foltin of the Freedom Forum Institute, Puri (2021) explained that inalienable rights are such that are so fundamental that they cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws. Another name for inalienable rights, according to the researcher, is natural rights. It is against this backdrop that any law that seeks to negatively impact freedom of speech is viewed with disdain by right thinking members of the society as seen in the case of the opposition to various anti-social media bills proposed or passed into law in Nigeria. Proponents of some of the bill received backlash from

members of the public who felt their freedoms could be impeded on such grounds and on the basis of sections of the proposed laws.

Free expression has also been described as one of the fundamental human rights enshrined in the constitutions of different democratic nations/societies and also contained in several international agreements, wherein citizens reserve the freedom to act according to their will and also possess the powers to disseminate or express opinions in art, speech, press or any other means they deem fit (Yoshkov, 2021). A further definition described the concept of freedom of speech as the right reserved for a person to freely self-express in writing (Luk, 2021). The two definitions captured in the preceding sentences depict the known fact that freedom of speech is fundamental and with it, people in our societies are free to express opinions on matters the way they deem fit. Therefore, regulations imposed to inhibit such freedoms, are viewed with disdain and considered as direct affront to the inalienability of these rights as enshrined in constitutions and agreements with national, regional and international scope.

According to Kavoglu and Salar (2020), freedom of speech or expression refers to individual rights to hold opinions and to seek, receive, and impart ideas, and information through their desired media type or form without any form of interference from authorities. The media angle in the foregoing definition is the crux of this study because media regulations are often targeted with a view to moderate expression of opinions through traditional media organisation by persons, group of persons, organised labour, and other groups. Therefore an attack on free speech also translates to a violation of press freedom because expressions are amplified via media outlets. America Civil Liberties Union

(2022) known by the acronym of ACLU noted that the protection of free expression translates to the protection of a free press, diversity inherent in thought, and the democratic process among others. Put in a different way, whenever and wherever protection of free speech is observed, then there is free press/media, democracy and its processes, as well as diverse thoughts where people are free to air their opinion without being victimised. Interestingly, a note has also been provided that freedom of the press is related to freedom of speech – however, whereas, freedom of speech is broader in scope encompassing every aspect of communication, freedom of the press is specific to the media; radio, television, newspaper, the Internet, and any other public communication medium (Summer & Williams, 2022).

A significant definition/explanation given for freedom of expression or free speech is that it is the ability of a person or group of persons to express their held beliefs, emotions, ideas, and thoughts about issues, free from any form of government censorship (Adetayo, 2021). This aligns with the provision of Nigeria's 1999 Constitution (as amended) which in section 39 (1) states that "every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference." According to Adegboruwa (2021), freedom of expression simply refers to the liberty enjoyed by people to openly discuss matters or issues without fear of restriction or being restrained. In other words, individuals enjoy this freedom and have no need to worry about the restrictions (if any) imposed by authorities as such cannot interfere with the freedom enjoyed.

Figure 1
Conceptual Flow Chart



The flow chart (see figure 1) is a systematic review of policy frameworks in which the researchers established the connection between digital technologies' rapid growth and regulatory structures that govern media practice in Nigeria. At the top of the framework is "growth of digital media" which explains the expansion of social media, streaming platforms, and online journalism. The transformation has brought about a significant alteration of the way information is produced, disseminated, and consumed, creating both

new opportunities and technology-related challenges. Some of the challenges include misinformation, hate speech, data privacy concerns, difficulty of content control due to the decentralised digital spaces, and the absence of platform accountability. These challenges highlight the need for effective policy response. Accordingly, various policy frameworks have been designed and established in efforts to introduce regulations that guide media operations in the digital environment of Nigeria. These are in form of broadcasting codes and

regulations, cybercrime laws, and digital communications policies.

The implementation of the policy frameworks requires inputs from regulatory institutions and agents/stakeholders, including agencies of government, media organisations, civil societies, and operators of digital platforms. The reality is that these actors or agents influence policy implementation and enforcement. The regulatory implementations mechanisms provide the channels through which stakeholders seek to manage the digital environment. Some of the mechanisms include media content monitoring, digital platforms licensing, content moderation, and enforcement of digital regulation compliance. The process results in regulatory outcomes, some of which include improvement in media accountability, reinforced ethical journalism, protection of public interest, and a balance in the link between regulations and freedom of expression in society. Finally, there is recognition of the importance of feedback and policy reform, wherein continuous evaluation of existing policies culminates in adjustments and updates (as in policy reviews), adaptation to emerging technologies and knowledge of media trends.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of media regulation in Nigeria is rooted in the nation's struggle with authoritarian governance and its transition to democracy. Media regulation has often been used as a tool to control information dissemination, particularly during periods of military rule. Kolawole and Umejei (2018) noted that during successive military regimes, the government adopted overbearing approaches to controlling the press. This period was characterised by the arbitrary closure of media houses, arrests, and even the assassination of journalists like Dele Giwa, whose death by a letter bomb is widely believed to have been state-

sanctioned. Such actions reflect the state's deep-seated distrust of an independent press and its determination to suppress dissenting voices.

The establishment of regulatory bodies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) in 1992 and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC) underscores the state's continued efforts to exert control over media practices. Ihechu and Okugo (2013) explained that the NBC, empowered by Decree 38 of 1992, was created to regulate broadcast media in Nigeria, focusing on licensing, content monitoring, and enforcement of broadcasting codes. The NPC, on the other hand, was established to regulate print media and ensure adherence to professional standards. While these bodies were established to uphold media standards, their roles often blurred the lines between regulation and censorship, particularly when the government perceived the media as a threat.

As Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999, hopes were high that media freedom would improve. However, even in the democratic era, the Nigerian government has maintained a cautious and sometimes repressive stance toward the media. Tella, Olaniyi, and Alabi (2020) argued that while democratic systems are expected to foster free expression, Nigerian authorities have shown tendencies to suppress media freedom under the guise of maintaining national security and public order. The introduction of laws aimed at controlling media content, particularly in the digital space, is evidence of this trend. The move to regulate digital media is not surprising given the global trend where governments seek to manage the flow of information in an increasingly digital world (Couldry, 2007).

The Nigeria's transition to the digital age has brought significant challenges in media regulation, especially with the rise of social media and other online platforms

that have transformed political engagement and public discourse. Ohme (2018) explained that these platforms have opened up new avenues for citizens to participate in politics and express themselves. However, this increased information access has also resulted in increased concerns about the spread of misinformation and hate speech, prompting calls for regulation. The Nigerian government's attempts to introduce laws such as the "Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019" (also known as the Anti-Social Media Bill) have sparked intense debates. Critics argue that these laws, under the guise of curbing misinformation, could be used to suppress dissent and silence government critics, raising fears of undermining free expression (Kazeem, 2020).

Similarly, the introduction of the "National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill" has intensified concerns about media regulation in Nigeria. This bill, which proposes severe penalties, including the death sentence for hate speech, has been widely condemned by CSOs and prominent Nigerians, particularly those in the opposing sides. Jannamike (2021) observed that CSOs have warned that such extreme measures could lead to self-censorship among journalists and citizens undermining Nigeria's fragile democracy. This regulatory push mirrors global efforts to address the dangers posed by harmful online content, but in Nigeria, it is further complicated by the country's history of media suppression and the lingering mistrust between the government and the press (Tella et al., 2020). Thus, Nigeria is faced with a particularly and peculiarly complex challenge in balancing regulation with the need to preserve fundamental democratic rights such as free speech.

The debate surrounding media regulation in Nigeria reflects the broader tension between the need to control

harmful content and the protection of free expression. Statti and Torres (2020) argued that while governments have legitimate reasons to regulate digital platforms, these efforts must not be used to stifle dissent. In Nigeria, the vague wording of laws like the Anti-Social Media Bill and the Hate Speech Bill leaves room for arbitrary enforcement, which could be used to target opposition voices and restrict media freedom (Kazeem, 2020). Moreover, the global nature of digital media further complicates these regulatory efforts, as platforms like Facebook and X operate across borders, making it difficult (though not completely impossible) for national governments to control the flow of information. As Couldry (2007) suggested, this global public sphere raises important questions about the effectiveness of national regulations in the face of multinational technology companies that control much of the digital discourse.

Nigeria's approach to digital media regulation falls within a broader context of global Internet governance debates. The growing power of social media platforms and their role in shaping political discourse has prompted many governments to explore ways to regulate content, but these efforts have to be balanced against the need to protect democratic freedoms. Cruft and Ashton (2022) advocated for regulatory frameworks that are built on transparency, accountability, and public participation. In Nigeria, the development of any regulatory measures should involve consultations with all relevant stakeholders, including journalists, civil society, and the public, to ensure that these laws do not undermine free expression. This inclusive approach would help build trust and avoid the perception of government overreach.

One potential solution to the challenge of media regulation in Nigeria is the adoption of self-regulation mechanisms by

digital platforms. Ohme (2018) suggested that platforms like Facebook and Twitter could take greater responsibility for moderating content, thereby reducing the need for government intervention. Self-regulation could allow for more flexibility in addressing misinformation and hate speech while minimising the risk of government overreach. However, as Owusu-Ansah and van der Walt (2021) cautioned, self-regulation is not without its challenges, particularly in contexts where technology companies are driven by profit motives rather than the public interest. Thus, any self-regulatory framework would need to be carefully designed to ensure that it aligns with democratic values and promotes public trust.

In essence, the path to digital media regulation in Nigeria is fraught with complexities, reflecting both local and global challenges in governing the digital public sphere. While regulation is necessary to address issues such as misinformation and hate speech, it has to be done in a way that safeguards the right to free expression; a cornerstone of democratic governance. The solution lies in the development of transparent, accountable, and participatory frameworks that involve all stakeholders in the regulatory process. By adopting a balanced approach that considers both the global nature of digital platforms and the local context of Nigeria's media landscape, the country can avoid the pitfalls of overregulation and protect its democratic gains.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study adopted a qualitative research design, specifically utilising the systematic literature review method to investigate the subject matter. This approach involved an extensive review of existing literature, focusing on secondary data sources such as journal articles, book chapters, books, online resources, relevant reports, and empirical studies. The

population for the study comprised scholarly works, policy documents, and credible online sources that addressed media regulation and free expression in the digital age. Systematic sampling was employed to select studies that directly aligned with the research objectives, ensuring that only the most relevant and authoritative sources were considered. Data collection for this study entailed an in-depth examination and synthesis of these materials to identify patterns, trends, and debates surrounding the regulation of digital media environment in Nigeria and its implications for free expression. The analysis was conducted through content analysis, whereby the themes and arguments presented in the literature were critically evaluated to draw insights and conclusions.

Figure 2
PRISMA Flow Diagram

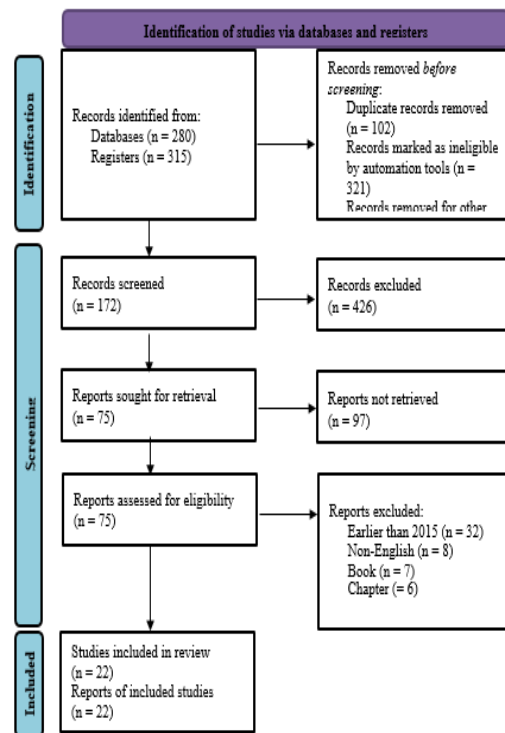


Figure 2 is the process adopted for identifying studies via databases and registers. Accordingly, the researchers searched major databases like Web of

Science, Google Scholar and JSTOR. Initial results returned 595 relevant studies (databases, n = 280; registers, n = 315). Prior to the screening, 102 duplicate records were removed while the automation system marked 321 records as ineligible based on the focus of this study. The researchers were left with 172 eligible records for screening. After a thorough screening process, further exclusions were made based on the following factors: studies published prior to 2015 (n = 32), studies not published in English language (n = 8), records on books (n = 7), and chapters (n = 6). Studies included in the review after screening (n = 22). The implication is that the review is based on 22 records of studies that pertain to the research scope and objectives.

RESULTS

The systematic review identified 22 studies that met the inclusion criteria following a thorough screening of relevant databases (see Table 1 for details about the thematic arrangements of the studies). The studies were published around 2017–2025 with focus on various aspects of media regulations within the context of the Nigerian digital environment. Most of the studies included examined regulatory frameworks that govern digital broadcasting, online media, and social media governance. The studies adopted diverse methodologies, such as empirical surveys, legal analysis, and policy analysis. The study types include journal articles, legal analyses, policy documents, government reports among others.

The reviewed literature such as Abubakar and Hassan (2017), and Uchendu et al. (2025) consistently point institutions, including the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), and the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) as crucial public actors responsible for the regulation of the digital

environment of Nigeria. These agencies of government are saddled with issuing licenses, compliance monitoring, and digital communication policies enforcement. Some of the studies show overlap in the various agencies’ regulatory responsibilities. In essence, their functions overlap as two or more agencies may be saddled with the responsibility of performing same or similar task leading to duplication of assigned duties.

Table 1
Theme Table

Theme	Number of Studies	Key Issues
Media regulations in the digital era in Nigeria	13	Key institutions responsible for the regulation of Nigeria’s digital environment were identified, including NCC, NBC and NITDA. Various aspects of the regulations were also touched – from the cybercrime regulations to data protection and broadcast codes and regulations.
Challenges associated with digital media regulations in Nigeria	9	Ambiguity of certain sections of the regulations promotes opposition by members of the public. The challenge of mutual suspicion and lack of trust in government coupled with the thin line between regulations and the infringement on freedom of expression of citizens
Total	22	

Emerging themes from the systematic literature review (see Table 1) highlight various aspects of media regulations in the digital era in Nigeria and the challenges associated with the regulation. As per findings of some of the studies like Egbunike (2020), Nzewi (2021), and Santos and Inobemhe (2021), the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation, Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention) Act, and the National Broadcasting Code are some of the policy instruments that shape the country’s digital landscape. Significantly,

a theme that emerged from the review borders on the efforts of government to regulate social media platforms and the dissemination of digital content. The studies focused on the growing influence of platforms such as Facebook, X, and YouTube in shaping public opinion, public discourse, and information exchange in Nigeria. Concerns on the spread of harmful content, hate speech, and misinformation were also highlighted in the studies.

Across the reviewed studies, several challenges were identified. These challenges were said to affect the quest by the authorities to regulate digital media in Nigeria. One of the most frequently cited issue across the studies (Kazeem, 2020; Ohme, 2018) borders on the opposition of members of the public on the grounds of the ambiguity of some sections of the frameworks. Mutual suspicion arising from the lack of trust between the government and the press on one hand, and the public on the other hand was identified in another study reviewed (Tella et al., 2020). The thin line between digital media regulations and infringement on freedom of expression was another significant challenge highlighted in the review (Obiora, Chiamofu & Chiamogu, 2022; Okewulonu, 2023).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the intricate and often contentious relationship between media regulation and free expression in Nigeria, especially in its transition from military rule to democracy. The historical trajectory of media regulation, as noted by Kolawole and Umejei (2018), reveals a consistent pattern of government control aimed at silencing dissenting voices under the guise of national security and public order. This is consistent with the research of Tella, Olaniyi, and Alabi (2020), who observed that even in the democratic era; Nigerian authorities have maintained a cautious

approach toward media freedom, often invoking security concerns to justify restrictive policies. The idea of abuse of platforms has been part of the reasons for the push toward censorship (Adekunle, 2018). Accordingly, the government yearns to curtail citizens' rights to free expression using regulations of platforms (Bada & Enyongndi, 2024; Onyeabor, 2023). From the period of the telecommunication and electronic crimes decree to the cybercrime bills, Nigeria as a country has steadily shown its resolve to regulate digital platforms (Uchendu et al., 2025). The country also has Nigeria Data Protection Regulation and the National Broadcasting Code actively in place to regulate the media environment. The creation of regulatory bodies like the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Press Council (NPC), initially meant to uphold professional media standards, has frequently crossed into censorship territory (Abubakar & Hassan, 2017). These findings suggest that while regulatory oversight is crucial to maintaining professionalism, it is often manipulated to stifle dissent and limit press freedom, reflecting an ongoing tension between state interests and democratic ideals. In modern Nigeria, agencies like NCC and NITDA actively pursue the cause of digital media regulations in different ways.

In the digital era, this tension has only intensified as new media platforms have emerged, offering alternative channels for public discourse and political participation. The findings reveal that, like many other nations, Nigeria is grappling with the global challenge that is associated with digital media regulation (Okokon, Okon & Harcourt-Whyte, 2024). There is a growing concerns on the best template or frameworks to regulate digital landscape across different territories of the world. It is even more so since digital platforms allow citizens and other users like journalists to bypass traditional media

gatekeepers, fostering a more open space for political debate (Arjomand, 2021; Lata, 2024). However, as governments worldwide attempt to regulate these new forms of media, the risk of overreach becomes palpable. In Nigeria, the drive to regulate digital media is often framed as necessary to curb misinformation and uphold ethical standards, yet it also raises concerns of potential repression. The challenge, therefore, lies in striking a balance between maintaining order and protecting free expression; a balance that remains delicate and unresolved as Nigeria continues to navigate its evolving media landscape.

Findings from the review, particularly in line with the study by Santas and Inobemhe (2021) also showed that the #EndSARS protests in 2020 marked a turning point in the quest to regulate media in the digital era because government perceived digital platforms to be powerful tools used for mobilisation in respect of digital activism as seen during the protests. Consequently, the bill for an act on Protection from Internet Falsehoods and Manipulation and other Related Matters was modified to capture provisions that could easily ensure regulations of virtual spaces. This bill was also christened the social media bill seemingly targeted at controlling free speech and use of the social media and related media forms (Egbunike, 2020). The ultimate goal, government revealed was the need to protect users across the platforms. Nzewi (2021) identified the need for privacy protection as the basis for the introduction of the bill before the parliament of Nigeria.

The study showed insights that pertain to Nigeria's efforts to regulate digital media, underscoring the complexity and sensitivity of the issue in the digital age. The introduction of legislative measures such as the "Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019" and the "National Commission for the

Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill" highlights the government's attempt to manage the spread of harmful content online. However, as revealed in the reviews, these bills have faced strong opposition from civil society and media advocates due to their vague and broad provisions, which many fear could be used to suppress dissent and target critics of the government. This aligns with the observations of Kazeem (2020) and Jannamike (2021), who argued that the ambiguous nature of these laws poses a risk to free speech. As Ohme (2018) noted, while the regulation of digital platforms is necessary to curb misinformation and hate speech, it is critical that such efforts do not infringe on citizens' fundamental rights to free expression.

The study further reveals that Nigeria's regulatory push reflects global trends because various governments across the world are faced with the challenge of controlling digital content without compromising democratic freedoms. However, Nigeria's historical context of media suppression complicates these efforts. According to Tella et al. (2020), this historical backdrop, marked by a lack of trust between the government and the press, necessitates a delicate balance in crafting regulations that address legitimate concerns about harmful content while safeguarding free expression. Findings show strong advocacy for a careful and cautious design of regulatory frameworks to avoid reverting to the heavy-handed control seen in Nigeria's past, which according to the studies, could undermine the democratic progress made since the country's transition to civilian rule in 1999. This becomes imperative on the grounds of several studies that showed a trend of the desires for regulation always stemming from provocations implying that the government's intention is to curtail free expression (Obiora, Chiamofu & Chiamogu, 2022; Okewulonu, 2023). Social media are considered as platforms

that enable free expression in our climes (Araromi, 2018; Inobemhe et al., 2021). These also echo the concerns raised by civil societies that view the current bills as potential threats to democracy and free expression.

Furthermore, the study points out the global nature of digital media, which complicates national regulatory efforts. As Mattelart et al. (2024) highlighted, the borderless flow of information in the digital age creates a global public sphere. In this sphere, users from different nations are able to interact and this makes it difficult for any single government to effectively regulate content on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X, which operate across borders. This global context requires Nigeria to consider the limitations of national laws in a digitally interconnected world. One potential solution, as suggested by Ohme (2018), is the adoption of self-regulation mechanisms where platforms themselves take on the responsibility of content moderation. However, Owusu-Ansah and van der Walt (2021) cautioned that self-regulation poses its own challenges, especially in cases where the profit motives of tech companies may conflict with the public interest. Thus, the study calls for a regulatory framework rooted in transparency, accountability, and public participation, ensuring that all stakeholders, including civil society and the public, have a voice in the process.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has identified regulatory frameworks while examining the complexities of media regulation in Nigeria's digital age. It highlights the constant tensions and concerns arising from government's desire to regulate online platforms and the moral need to protect free expression. The findings show that current regulatory efforts, such as the Anti-Social Media Bill, pose significant risks to free speech due to their broad and

ambiguous nature, potentially leading to censorship and self-censorship. The study also underscores the importance of adopting self-regulation mechanisms for digital platforms, allowing them to address harmful content while avoiding government overreach. Clearer legal definitions and judicial oversight are necessary to prevent the arbitrary use of these regulations. Ultimately, the study concludes that a more balanced, transparent, and participatory approach to digital media regulation is essential to protect democratic principles and ensure that free expression is not unduly compromised. The practical implication of this study is that regulators and lawmakers can leverage insights from the result to update outdated media and communication laws towards designing clearer regulatory guidelines to meet current realities of the digital age. This is crucial because a well-informed and considerately-designed framework can provide support for the growth of Nigeria's digital economy by encouraging innovation and investment in digital media, strengthening infrastructure and competitiveness, and promoting creative industries and local content development.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This research was conducted independently without financial, political, or personal relationships that could inappropriately influence the study's findings or interpretations.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

We declare that this manuscript is our original work.

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