MATRIX OF DEPENDENCE, POSTCOLONIALISM, AND SOCIAL MEDIA REGULATION IN AN AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Introduction

Increasingly in Africa, more countries are drafting regulatory policies to target social media and internet content. The case is no different in Nigeria, the case study that I use, where there is the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill 2019, which has been dubbed the Social Media Bill. A Twitter ban was also implemented in June 2021, mirroring the trend of internet and social media bans on the continent. These developments in Africa further find expression within the context of the regulatory turn globally. Expectedly, social media users in Nigeria have opposed the regulatory moves that have been introduced in the country, and the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill has been used to organise resistance.

Given this opposition, my first objective in this paper was to highlight what social media users and other stakeholders perceive as credible regulatory alternatives. Analysis of the interview responses led me to a second objective, which was to show how the credible alternatives could be understood through postcolonial lenses (Ashcroft et al., 2007). I further draw from research into platform power and structural imperialism (Galtung, 1971) to make the argument that with regards to social media regulation, Nigeria, alongside the wider African continent, is locked into a matrix of dependence.

Method

I analyse interview responses from 19 stakeholders. They include four digital rights campaigners, four online media practitioners, two media literacy experts, two public policy experts, two internet industry experts, and five Twitter users who utilised the #SayNoToSocialMediaBill tag. For analysis, I adopted the reflexive thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2021). This framework afforded me the chance to reflect and relate the findings to wider issues as they pertain to postcolonialism. The interviews were conducted in two tranches between January

and October 2021. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. It was agreed beforehand that the transcripts would be anonymised.

Findings

From the interviews, I identify four themes/alternatives to social media regulation in Nigeria: copying Western nations, platform self-regulation, governance built on trust, and digital media literacy.

The first theme – copying Western nations – captures the most explicit reference to the matrix of dependence. The interviewees mentioned the need to follow the examples of Western nations, who have taken up "democratic solutions" to address social media online harms (Participant 17). The supposed "best approach" is then viewed as what has been embraced by Western nations (Participant 11). The implication here is the resolution that acceptable solutions can only come if Nigeria copies the strategy in liberal democracies. I argue that this is tied to a postcolonial thinking, representing colonial legacy and the impact of European imperialism on colonised territories (Ashcroft et al., 2007).

Second, the interviewees felt that the current prevailing global system of regulation – platform self-regulation – should be maintained. Reference was made to the Internet Falsehood Bill, as interviewees expressed the notion that it was better to have platforms regulate content than to have the Nigerian government do this. This implies that countries like Nigeria have to continue to depend on platforms for social media regulation. In the wider sense, this dependence is tied to the regulatory paradigm established by the United States through Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act.

In terms of governance built on trust, the interviewees highlighted the need for collectivisation – one where the Nigerian government engages in respectful dialogue with national stakeholders. One respondent further drew attention to the international multistakeholder framework between government, corporations, and civil society groups (Participant 3). Still, issues of dependence remain since the power imbalance in a multistakeholder framework suggests that African nations function under a relation on dependence. An example is the description of the Internet Governance Forum as being made up of "hawks" led by China and "doves" led by the US (Mueller, 2010). The global order then places Africa in a web of dependence on the West or East for the design on internet governance policies.

Finally, there was digital media literacy, described as "the most important thing today" [to address online harms] (Participant 8). What we see here is an interpretation of social media users as responsible for the kind of content they expose themselves to and how to protect themselves from harmful content. In particular, there was mention of digital media literacy education, and some commended UNESCO for its media and information literacy curriculum for teachers and for piloting a literacy club in some Nigerian higher education institutions.

Conclusion

To sum up, I have highlighted the themes in the interview transcripts. As noted earlier, my initial aim was to identify what stakeholders understand as credible alternatives to social media regulation in an African context. Analysis of the transcripts then reveal the underlying system of dependence within which Nigeria is represented – with the idea that to have a credible regulatory regime, the country has to effectively copy the West. The other themes point to reliance on the US paradigm of platform self-regulation or a global bloc under multi-stakeholderism. Digital media literacy is far less related to dependence, but it still bears some connection given the transfer of knowledge from international agencies like UNESCO.

It is based on this that I introduce the concept of the matrix of dependence – the sense that no matter what social media regulatory agenda countries like Nigeria embrace, it will be defined by the relation of subalternity. One might make the counterargument that the reality of the digital age is that regulatory actors across the world function under some form of (inter)dependence. Regardless, I suggest that the relation of dependence is far more pronounced in the African context. This is because of structural imperialist order (Galtung, 1971) defined by postcolonialism, guaranteeing a one-way flow of digital technology from developed to developing nations. Regulation of any kind then flows on that same line, locking African nations like Nigeria into the matrix of dependence.

Take the argument for the need of a systemic approach to regulation for instance (Wood, 2021). This approach, which is emerging, advances the need to alter platform business models to make the online space more civil. This is potentially good, only that countries like Nigeria can do nothing about it except to depend on Western nations to do the alteration. This holds further implications for supposedly global research into social media regulation that conveniently exclude Africa. It is this that underlines the implicit notion, even among my interviewees, that Africa cannot but rely on external actors for social media regulation – the understanding being that the continent remains locked into the matrix of dependence.

References

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