Social Media and African Crises: A Comparative Study of Nigeria and South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study analyses the intricate influence of social media on crisis dynamics in Africa by contrasting Nigeria's #EndSARS protests (2020) with South Africa's instability in July 2021. This research utilises a comparative case study and mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative hashtag analysis, digital penetration statistics, and qualitative content coding, to investigate how technological infrastructures, historical legacies, and socio-political contexts influence social media's dual role in empowering marginalised voices and intensifying social fragmentation. This article theoretically integrates the networked public sphere within African hybrid media ecologies, utilising framing theory to emphasise colonial, ethnic, and economic narratives, and examines the activism-surveillance dilemma that underscores the dual emancipatory and repressive potentials of digital platforms. The findings illustrate Nigeria's largely youth-driven, Twitter-centric movement as a paradigm of decentralised activism and global cooperation, in stark contrast to South Africa's WhatsApp-enabled turmoil characterised by disinformation and xenophobic violence within insular networks. The results highlight that platform impacts are profoundly influenced by contextual factors, including infrastructure, governmental capability, and colonial history. The research promotes legislative measures that emphasise digital literacy, multilingual supervision, safeguarding digital rights, and governance of platforms headed by Africans. This research provides a context-sensitive, decolonial framework to elucidate social media's paradoxical effects on democratic processes and crisis management in Africa.

Keywords: Social Media, African Crises, #EndSARS, South Africa Unrest, Digital Activism, Misinformation

INTRODUCTION

The swift expansion of social media on a global scale has significantly transformed the landscape of political discourse, emergency management, and public participation. In various contexts, platforms including Twitter (currently X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have significantly altered the ways in which individuals obtain information, organise in response to grievances, and formulate alternative narratives during periods of turmoil. The transformations occurring in Africa hold particular significance as they engage with historically fragile media ecologies, which are marked by the legacies of colonial censorship, disparities in press freedoms, and persistent infrastructural inequalities. In this context, social media transcends its role as a mere extension of communication tools; it emerges as a contested arena wherein structural inequalities, colonial histories, and global technological governance intersect.

This research examines the influence of social media within the context of two significant crises in Africa: the #EndSARS protests in Nigeria in 2020 and the civil unrest that occurred in South Africa in July 2021. The selection of these cases is predicated on three primary considerations. Initially, it is essential to recognise that both nations serve as regional powers characterised by substantial and digitally engaged populations. This positioning renders them significant contexts for analysing the interplay between social media, democratic processes, and crisis dynamics (Kemp, 2024a; 2024b). The crises under examination reveal divergent forms of

digital mobilisation, characterised by youth-led, rights-focused protests in Nigeria, in contrast to the factionalised, xenophobic, and economically motivated unrest observed in South Africa. Both cases illustrate the dual roles of digital platforms: they serve as arenas for the amplification of marginalised voices, while simultaneously functioning as structures that intensify division, propagate misinformation, and facilitate repression (Kirk, 2024).

While global scholarship frequently argues whether social media catalyses democratisation or destabilises it, most of the theory is based on Western contexts with distinct infrastructural and institutional surroundings (Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2015). The hybrid media ecologies present in Africa, which integrate oral traditions, community radio, encrypted messaging, and global platforms, necessitate a framework that takes into account historical legacies, socio-economic disparities, and decolonial epistemologies (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Mutsvairo & Ragnedda, 2019).

The #EndSARS movement serves as a prominent illustration of the liberating capabilities inherent in digital activism, as the widespread dissemination of evidence regarding police brutality mobilised youth-led protests on a global scale. This movement effectively utilised hashtags, live streaming, and crowdfunding strategies to circumvent the limitations imposed by state-controlled media (Ruf, 2021; Bello et al., 2023). Conversely, the unrest in South Africa was instigated by the incarceration of former President Jacob Zuma and was characterised by the swift dissemination of provocative material via WhatsApp and Facebook, which exacerbated incidents of looting and xenophobic violence (SAHRC, 2024; Raborife et al., 2024).

Although individual studies have examined these occurrences, a comprehensive comparative analysis of social media's role in various African contexts is still lacking. This comparison provides significant insights, highlighting underlying similarities particularly concerning the impact of misinformation and state actions, while recognising context-specific variations. It facilitates theoretical advancement by avoiding overgeneralisation from isolated contexts, positioning African experiences within global communication discourses while contesting epistemic reliance on Euro-American frameworks (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022; Afunugo, 2024).

This research presents three interconnected enquiries: What is the impact of social media on the traits, scale, and repercussions of crises in Nigeria and South Africa? What dominant patterns and contextual factors influence digital crisis mediation? What ethical, regulatory, and policy issues arise for African digital governance from a decolonial perspective?

The study presents three primary reasons. Social media serves a paradoxical function in African crises, facilitating collective mobilisation but also exacerbating polarisation, violence, and repression. Secondly, these dynamics are not exclusively technological; they are interwoven with local infrastructure, demographics, and historical contexts—illustrated by Nigeria's youthful population promoting decentralised Twitter activism, in contrast to South Africa's older demographics, structural inequalities, and WhatsApp usage inciting fragmented unrest. Third, current digital political theories necessitate decolonial modification: Africa's networked publics are divided by exclusionary practices, discourse framing is profoundly influenced by colonial and ethnic histories, and digital activism is intrinsically connected to widespread surveillance systems.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The convergence of social media and crisis communication has been extensively examined; however, the unique dynamics of the African context warrant focused investigation. The prevailing theories in the realm of digital politics have largely been shaped by Euro-American contexts characterised by networked protests and the dissemination of information. However, applying these frameworks directly to the African context may inadvertently perpetuate epistemic dependency and create analytical blind spots (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Wasserman, 2018).

Global Perspectives: The Role of Social Media in Facilitating Protest and Navigating Risk

The early body of research concerning digital platforms highlighted their capacity for emancipation. Shirky (2011) posited that platforms like Twitter and Facebook facilitate a "networked public sphere," thereby

enhancing horizontal communication and circumventing traditional state or corporate gatekeepers. Castells (2015) similarly emphasised the influence of "networked movements," which operate without centralised leadership. The aforementioned perspectives were significantly influenced by events such as the Arab Spring (Hussain & Howard, 2013) and Occupy Wall Street (Tufekci, 2017), during which the utilisation of hashtags, live streams, and viral videos served to enhance collective action and foster global solidarity. These early critiques have been further substantiated by recent empirical studies on algorithmic amplification and its role in global disinformation campaigns (e.g., Valiyev, 2024; Dance, 2025; (Moroojo et al., 2025).

Concurrently, social media has been critically examined as a conduit for misinformation, polarisation, and the emergence of digital authoritarianism. Morozov (2011) introduced the concept of "net delusion" to underscore the ways in which governments utilise the same digital platforms to surveil dissent, disseminate propaganda, and validate repressive measures. Recent research indicates that algorithmic amplification plays a significant role in the formation of echo chambers and the propagation of disinformation cascades (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; (Choi et al, 2020). The influence of social media during the 2016 U.S. elections, the Brexit referendum, and the emergence of populism across Europe highlighted its capacity to disrupt democratic frameworks (Persily, 2017).

The ongoing discussions reveal a paradoxical dynamic: social media serves both as a mechanism for mobilisation and as an instrument of repression. Nevertheless, these theoretical frameworks frequently depend on assumptions that are centred around Western contexts, including literate populations, well-developed broadband infrastructures, and comparatively strong institutional frameworks. The uncritical application of these frameworks to the African context may obscure the intricate ways in which structural inequalities, colonial legacies, and hybrid media ecologies shape the landscape of digital politics.

African Media Scholarship: Exploring Hybridities, Histories, and Inequalities

African scholars contend that the media ecologies present on the continent defy comprehension through the lens of technological determinism. Nyamnjoh (2017) emphasises the notion of "incompleteness" as a fundamental characteristic of communication within the African context, wherein oral traditions, community radio, and kinship networks interact with digital platforms. Wasserman (2018) highlights the significant influence of geopolitics and power disparities on Africa's media systems, noting that these platforms are predominantly owned and controlled by corporations based in the Global North.

The significance of historical continuities cannot be understated. The #EndSARS protests in Nigeria resonate with historical precedents of clandestine journalism and publications opposing military rule, as noted by Olukotun, (2004). The digital dissent observed in South Africa reflects the intricate interplay of propaganda and counter-propaganda that characterised the anti-apartheid movement (Tyali, 2020). In both instances, social media did not create dissent but rather amplified pre-existing forms of resistance.

Access is further complicated by socio-economic inequalities. Nigeria boasts a user base exceeding 100 million individuals engaging with the internet; however, the overall penetration rate remains under 50%, and the distribution of connectivity is markedly uneven (Kemp, 2024a). South Africa exhibits a higher level of penetration; however, it remains profoundly racialised.

African scholarship provides a critical examination of the governance structures associated with global platforms. Afunugo (2024) illustrates the ways in which "community standards" established in California frequently marginalise African voices, especially in instances where moderation fails to account for local languages and cultural contexts. The implementation of internet shutdowns by various African states serves as a notable manifestation of digital authoritarianism (Hassan, 2022). Consequently, the phenomenon of digital activism is inextricably linked to the dynamics of surveillance and repression.

Decolonial Perspectives: Moving Beyond Epistemic Dependency

Proponents of decolonial theory advocate for the prioritisation of African epistemologies within the realm of media research. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) posits that African studies should transcend epistemic reliance on Euro-American paradigms, emphasising the significance of colonial legacies, indigenous knowledge systems, and the

lived experiences of African populations. Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2022) expands the discourse to encompass disinformation studies, cautioning against the adoption of the "fake news" framework.

This analysis holds significant relevance in the examination of crises. In Nigeria, the discourse surrounding police brutality evokes historical recollections of colonial-era violent policing and authoritarian governance. Xenophobic misinformation in South Africa is rooted in the identity and exclusion narratives established during the apartheid era (Chenzi, 2021). Neglecting to recognise these historical contexts may lead to inadequate theoretical frameworks that fail to thoroughly elucidate the mechanisms behind the dissemination of digital content and the factors that drive its mobilisation.

Theoretical Framework

In examining the cases of Nigeria and South Africa, we utilise three interconnected theoretical frameworks, informed by African and decolonial scholarship.

The Adaptation of the Networked Public Sphere

The initial characterisation of decentralised online communication, as articulated by Shirky (2011), is contextualised within the African landscape by recognising the prevailing fragmentation and inequality inherent in the region. The dynamics of Nigerian Twitter activism highlight a lively yet elite-oriented digital public sphere, whereas the case of South African WhatsApp groups underscores the exclusionary characteristics inherent in closed communication networks. In alignment with Nyamnjoh (2017), the present framework underscores the notion that African digital publics are inherently incomplete, influenced by infrastructural inequalities, and situated within existing offline hierarchies.

The Application of Framing Theory in the Context of Crisis Narratives

Frames serve as interpretive frameworks that influence the comprehension of events (Entman, 1993). In the context of crises in Africa, it is common for narratives to reference ethnic, colonial, or economic histories (Arowolo, 2017). The #EndSARS movement constructed a narrative depicting the state as both violent and corrupt, effectively mobilising international sympathy. Conversely, #ShutdownKZN characterised the unrest as a manifestation of "economic liberation" or "tribal loyalty," thereby exacerbating divisions (Vhumbunu, 2021).

The interplay between digital activism and surveillance presents a complex paradox that warrants critical examination. This dynamic relationship raises important questions regarding the efficacy and implications of online movements in an increasingly monitored digital landscape.

Digital platforms serve as a means of empowerment for activists; however, they concurrently facilitate surveillance by state and corporate entities (Tufekci, 2017; Valiyev, 2024). The Nigerian government implemented restrictions on Twitter and engaged in disinformation initiatives, while South Africa partnered with Facebook to enhance content moderation efforts. The presented examples exemplify the paradox inherent in ambivalent technologies, which serve as emancipatory instruments yet remain susceptible to repressive appropriation. Through the lens of decolonial critique, it becomes evident that the framework of platform governance is predominantly shaped by the priorities of the Global North, which frequently diverges from the actual conditions and needs present in African contexts (Afunugo, 2024). Collectively, these three perspectives provide a contextually aware, decolonial framework. The authors recognise the interplay of global dynamics, including networked publics, framing mechanisms, and surveillance practices.

Despite its value, the current body of scholarship reveals three significant gaps, notably the absence of comparative studies focused on Africa. The majority of analyses predominantly concentrate on individual country cases. A limited number of systems exist; numerous studies employ Western frameworks without necessary modifications, which poses a risk of epistemic dependency. While hashtag activism has garnered significant scholarly attention, there is a notable lack of focus on encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram, which serve as critical spaces for much of the mobilisation occurring in Africa.

This comparative analysis of Nigeria and South Africa serves to address existing gaps in the literature. This work incorporates a decolonial critique within the framework of global theories and employs a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data to offer a detailed analysis of the role of social media in crises across Africa.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a comparative mixed-methods framework to examine the influence of social media during Nigeria's #EndSARS protests and South Africa's July 2021 violence. These cases were chosen for their regional importance and differing digital environments, facilitating the examination of both overarching trends and context-specific dynamics.

Data was triangulated to ensure robustness. Quantitative data comprised platform utilisation statistics and Twitter API measurements. Qualitative data derived from coded social media content, government reports, and Afrobarometer polls. Network mapping illustrated online interaction frameworks. A sample of coded content, demonstrating the application of this scheme, is provided in Table 3.

A systematic content analysis was performed utilising an observation checklist that classified posts according to: Narrative Framework (e.g., protest themes), Information Authenticity (verified/unverified/false), and Mobilisation Purpose (e.g., calls to action). Intercoder reliability was elevated (Cohen's kappa), with unreliable data omitted.

Limitations encompass an emphasis on English-language and Twitter data, resulting in the under-representation of encryption platforms and colloquial content. Digital divides may skew sampling in favour of urban populations. Nonetheless, the methodology adeptly encapsulates socio-technical intricacies while conforming to decolonial imperatives for contextually relevant research.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The results are categorised into two primary sections: (1) the digital infrastructures and demographics affecting online mobilisation potential and (2) the crisis-specific social media dynamics defining Nigeria's #EndSARS protests (2020) and South Africa's July 2021 turmoil. A comparative synthesis highlights the contradictory function of social media as both a liberating instrument and a conduit for misinformation and societal division.

Divergent Digital Environments

Comprehending crisis dynamics necessitates contextualising them within extensive digital infrastructures. Table 1 delineates a comparison of essential digital metrics for Nigeria and South Africa in 2024.

Table 1: Digital Access and Usage in Nigeria and South Africa (2024)

Indicator	Nigeria	South Africa
Population	226.5 million	60.7 million
Internet Penetration	103 million (45.5%)	45.34 million (74.7%)
Social Media Penetration	36.75 million (16.2%)	26 million (42.8%)
Median Age	17.3 years	27.7 years
Median Mobile Speed	26.5 Mbps	49.7 Mbps
Dominant Platforms	Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook	Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube

Source: Compiled from Kemp (2024a; 2024b); Statica (2024).

The demographic characteristics of Nigeria, characterised by a youthful population, contribute to a form of political activism that is predominantly facilitated through Twitter, highlighting a trend towards digital engagement. In contrast, South Africa, with its higher levels of internet penetration but an older and more stratified population in terms of race and economics, tends to utilise platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook. This engagement is marked by a preference for localised and closed networks, reflecting the unique social dynamics at play within the country.

To analyze social media content systematically, a coding scheme was developed (Insight7, 2024; Fiveable, 2024; Medelyan, 2025), applied across platforms and periods of peak mobilization:

Table 2: Content Coding Table for Qualitative Analysis

Code Category	Description	Coding Criteria / Indicators	Example Extract
Narrative Frame	Thematic interpretation	Diagnostic; Prognostic; Motivational	"Police brutality must end now!" (Diagnostic, Motivational)
Information Validity	Content verification status	Verified; Unverified; False/Misleading	Verified protest video from Twitter
Mobilization Intent	Mobilization purpose	Fundraising; Protest organization; Awareness raising	"Donate for legal aid" (Fundraising)
Emotional Tone	Sentiment expressed	Positive; Neutral; Negative/Angry	Angry criticism of state repression
Platform	Source platform	Twitter; WhatsApp; Facebook; Instagram	Twitter

Source: Compiled by the author from case materials

Multiple coders applied this scheme independently, achieving intercoder reliability (Cohen's kappa > 0.8). Ambiguities were resolved through consensus, ensuring rigor and replicability.

Table 3: Sample of Coded Social Media Content

Extract (Platform)	Narrative Frame	Information Validity	Mobilization Intent	Emotional Tone
"SARS officers are killing us at Lekki Toll Gate. The government is silent! #EndSARS" (Twitter)	Diagnostic	Unverified	Awareness Raising	Negative / Angry
"Verified list of hospitals accepting #EndSARS protesters. Please share. #EndPoliceBrutality" (Twitter)	Prognostic	Verified	Protest Organization	Neutral
"Donate to the Feminist Coalition fund here: [link]. All funds go to medical aid." (Twitter)	Motivational	Verified	Fundraising	Positive
"They are bringing in foreign soldiers to shoot us! Share before they delete this!" (WhatsApp)	Diagnostic	False / Misleading	Awareness Raising	Negative / Angry
"Looters are coming from Zimbabwe to steal our jobs and our food. Protect your shops!" (Facebook)	Diagnostic	False / Misleading	N/A (Incitement)	Negative / Angry
"Peaceful protest at 10 AM tomorrow, Sandton City. We demand economic freedom. #ShutdownKZN" (Twitter)	Prognostic	Unverified	Protest Organization	Neutral

Source: Authors' own compilation from research data.

Case Study 1: The #EndSARS Movement in Nigeria (2020)

The #EndSARS protests represent a significant instance of digital activism within the African context, distinguished by the mobilisation of youth in opposition to police brutality. In response to extensive allegations of misconduct associated with the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), the movement predominantly utilised Twitter as its main platform, resulting in over 28 million tweets featuring the #EndSARS hashtag between October 8 and 20, 2020 (Ajisafe et al., 2021). The dissemination of viral videos showcasing instances of police violence effectively bypassed state-controlled media channels, thereby fostering a persuasive counter-narrative that positioned the state as both corrupt and violent.

Through the application of framing analysis, the movement adeptly utilised diagnostic frames that highlighted systemic state violence, prognostic frames that called for the disbandment of SARS, and motivational frames that emphasised youth solidarity and the pursuit of global justice (Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024). The frames in

question achieved global resonance, bolstered by the efforts of diaspora advocates and the coverage of international media, thereby elevating #EndSARS to the status of a transnational movement.

The role of digital organisation was significant, as exemplified by the actions of groups such as the Feminist Coalition, which utilised Twitter for purposes including fundraising, legal assistance, and the coordination of medical support, successfully raising millions in a matter of days (Ajisafe et al., 2021). The live streaming of events like the Lekki Toll Gate shooting on Instagram served as significant instances of "digital witnessing," inciting widespread national outrage and drawing international condemnation (Ruf, 2021).

The response of the Nigerian government encompassed strategies characterised by coercion and digital repression. The actions encompassed disinformation campaigns designed to undermine the legitimacy of protesters, the freezing of activist bank accounts, and the implementation of a temporary ban on Twitter in 2021 (Hassan, 2022). The experiences of activists reveal a complex interplay between empowerment and vulnerability within the realm of digital activism, as they encounter arrests, intimidation, and digital surveillance, highlighting the inherent tensions associated with state control.

Despite the official dissolution of SARS, there persists a notable public scepticism concerning meaningful reform (Ayandele, 2021). The protests transformed Nigeria's digital political landscape, positioning social media as a tool for accountability and serving as a catalyst for subsequent mobilisations. Nonetheless, the vulnerabilities present within authoritarian environments continued to manifest, indicating wider issues related to the resilience of digital activism.

Inter-case integration Nigeria's experience exemplifies the capacity of open, public platforms such as Twitter to facilitate decentralised movements characterised by global solidarity, a phenomenon enabled by a youthful and digitally adept population. This stands in contrast to the situation in South Africa, where variations in platforms and demographics produce unique dynamics during crises (refer to Section 4.3).

Case Study 2: The Unrest in South Africa, July 2021

The unrest in South Africa during July 2021 presents a stark contrast to the rights-based activism observed in Nigeria, highlighting the capacity of social media to exacerbate destructive factionalism. The imprisonment of former President Jacob Zuma incited protests that quickly intensified into extensive looting, arson, and violence, resulting in more than 350 deaths and significant economic repercussions (SAHRC, 2024).

In this case, Facebook and WhatsApp were more important than Twitter in terms of social media dynamics. The utilisation of encrypted WhatsApp groups facilitated the effective coordination of logistics pertaining to looting and transport, whereas Facebook pages served to amplify calls for action (Raborife et al., 2024). The insular characteristics of these networks obstructed external scrutiny and enabled the proliferation of misinformation.

Xenophobic narratives blaming immigrants for economic troubles, manufactured food shortages, and misleading reports on troop movements were among the many forms of misinformation that went viral (Chenzi, 2021). The phenomenon of algorithmic amplification on Facebook has been observed to intensify echo chambers, thereby exacerbating existing ethnic and economic tensions within society. Hashtags like #ShutdownKZN represent conflicting narratives that characterise the unrest as either a pursuit of economic liberation or an expression of tribal loyalty, thereby exacerbating societal fragmentation (Vhumbunu, 2021; Mtombeni, 2023).

Instead of shutting down the internet, the government chose to work with Meta, Facebook's parent corporation, to monitor and moderate content (SAHRC, 2024). This intricate framework of digital governance stands in stark contrast to Nigeria's authoritarian shutdown, yet it simultaneously raises significant concerns regarding corporate surveillance and the preservation of freedom of expression.

The unrest, in contrast to the #EndSARS movement, exhibited a notable absence of coherent leadership and clearly articulated demands. This situation ultimately resulted in pervasive distrust among participants and the absence of any substantial reforms. The analysis underscored the potential of social media to reinforce existing disparities and exacerbate factional tensions.

Compared to the open-platform youth activism in Nigeria, the encrypted, closed-platform communication among economically stratified elder populations in South Africa creates a digital public sphere that is prone to disintegration (Inter-case Integration Note).

Comparative Synthesis: Patterns and Divergences

Table 4: Comparative Analysis of #EndSARS (2020) and July 2021 Unrest

Dimension	Nigeria (#EndSARS)	South Africa (July 2021)
Primary Platforms	Twitter, Instagram (public)	WhatsApp, Facebook (private)
Mobilization Driver	Youth-led, anti-police brutality	Factional politics, economic grievances
Nature of Misinformation	State violence rumors	Xenophobic rumors, false shortages
State Response	Twitter ban, arrests, repression	Platform monitoring, content moderation
International Attention	High, global solidarity	Limited, mainly domestic focus
Underlying Divisions	Ethno-regional tensions emerged later	Pre-existing racial, economic, and xenophobic divisions exacerbated

Source: Compiled by the author from case materials.

Across various cases, there exists a notable emphasis on the pivotal role of social media as a mobilising infrastructure, alongside the considerable influence of misinformation in shaping radicalisation processes. The two governments implemented digital interventions, yet their strategies varied significantly, ranging from authoritarian shutdowns in Nigeria to corporate collaborations in South Africa.

Fundamental differences are centred around the concept of digital ecology and the ensuing implications for visibility. The dependence of Nigeria on open platforms has facilitated decentralised activism characterised by extensive visibility and a sense of cohesion. The closed and encrypted platforms in South Africa have contributed to the emergence of localised and factionalised unrest, characterised by a notable lack of external oversight. The affordances of these platforms, in conjunction with unique demographic factors and historical legacies, have influenced divergent narratives and outcomes during crises.

DISCUSSION

This comparative analysis elucidates the complex and frequently contradictory role of social media in the context of African crises, serving simultaneously as both liberating and divisive elements that influence political and social dynamics. This study examines the cases of Nigeria's #EndSARS movement and the unrest in South Africa in July 2021, utilising three theoretical frameworks: the networked public sphere, framing theory, and the activism–surveillance paradox. It offers a decolonial critique of global platform governance to analyse intricate digital phenomena.

The Networked Public Sphere within African Contexts

In Nigeria, the principal medium for advocacy was the publicly accessible, broadcast-centric platform of Twitter. This framework facilitated a decentralised, leaderless movement such as #EndSARS to bypass state-controlled media and amplify its grievances, in accordance with theoretical principles of a networked public sphere (Shirky, 2011; Castells, 2015). In South Africa, mobilisation was mostly enabled through the closed networks of WhatsApp. This led to a digital public sphere characterised by diminished transparency and increased localisation, dramatically contrasting with the prominent, open activism evident in Nigeria.

The contrasting results also underscore varying constraints. The Nigerian situation was limited by significant infrastructural disparities. The exorbitant cost of data and insufficient infrastructure led to the under-representation of rural and low-income demographics, illustrating what Nyamnjoh (2017, p. 13) refers to as the "incompleteness" of Africa's digital public sphere, characterised by unequal voice amplification. Conversely, the principal difficulty in South Africa was not universal accessibility but social fragmentation. The architecture of WhatsApp that facilitated successful coordination—encrypted groups—also resulted in the fragmentation of

discourse and the establishment of exclusionary echo chambers, which might deteriorate into micro-arenas of provocation and misinformation (Raborife et al., 2024).

Ultimately, a comparison of these instances illustrates that the African "networked public sphere" is not a monolithic entity but a multifaceted and disparate idea. The character is significantly shaped by the platform selection—whether open and broadcast-oriented or closed and encrypted—interacting with local access limitations and prevailing social hierarchies to generate markedly varied digital publics, each with unique opportunities and challenges.

The Construction of Frameworks, Narrative Architectures, and Historical Impact

While highlighting the critical significance of framing theory (Entman, 1993), a comparative study of the South African and Nigerian instances also demonstrates how these frames' effectiveness and coherence depend on how ingrained they are in particular historical and sociopolitical settings. In Nigeria, the #EndSARS movement effectively established a unified, ethical framework that contrasted the nonviolent youth demonstrators with a violent and corrupt governmental apparatus. This account, which echoed historical memories of military persecution (Olukotun, 2004, p. 44), facilitated significant internal mobilisation and cultivated international solidarity. Their efficacy corresponds with Arowolo's (2017) claim that frames become significant in African contexts when they express persistent, widely acknowledged frustrations.

In contrast, the South African case exhibits a considerable disparity in narrative consistency. The turmoil was marked by disjointed and disputed narratives, exemplified by hashtags such as #ShutdownKZN and #ZumaUnrest. These reflected a range of interpretations: a genuine fight against economic disparity, a manifestation of tribal loyalty to Zuma, or a justification for opportunistic criminal behaviour. The widespread scapegoating of immigrants via xenophobic stories illustrates a regression into divided identity politics, a remnant of the institutionalised divisions from the apartheid era (Chenzi, 2021). While Nigeria's movement consolidated around a cohesive rights-based framework, South Africa's was fragmented by conflicting and adversarial narratives.

This disparity illustrates that framing is not simply a purposeful communicative act but a process significantly influenced by historical route dependencies. From a decolonial viewpoint, the dominance of identity-centric, divisive frameworks—whether they ethnic, tribal, or xenophobic—can be attributed to colonial governance structures that entrenched difference as a means of control (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Social media algorithms, sometimes oblivious to local historical contexts, frequently accentuate existing divisions instead of mitigating them, demonstrating how technology can intensify profound fractures within a postcolonial society.

The Paradox of Activism and Surveillance

The two incidents clearly demonstrate the fundamental paradox of digital activism: the tools that facilitate mobilisation also subject activists to increased surveillance and algorithmic suppression. The Nigerian government's reaction to #EndSARS was unequivocal and dictatorial, with a Twitter ban, arrests, and digital disinformation initiatives. The utilisation of financial technology to immobilise activists' bank accounts illustrates the ease with which digital organising tools may be transformed into mechanisms of governmental oppression (Hassan, 2022). The act of digital witnessing, exemplified by the live video from the Lekki Toll Gate, fulfilled two purposes: it recorded state aggression for a global audience and simultaneously offered the state a detailed overview of activist networks for future targeting.

In South Africa, the expressions of digital control were more nuanced, illustrating a neoliberal paradigm of corporate-state collaboration. Instead of enforcing internet shutdowns, the government collaborated with Meta for content oversight and moderation (SAHRC, 2024). This method represents a nascent paradigm of corporate-state monitoring, in which commercial platform corporations serve as unaccountable adjudicators of acceptable discourse. This strategy, although less obviously violent than the Nigerian response, poses significant issues regarding the commercialisation of censorship and the deterioration of expression under the pretext of platform governance.

This paradox functions on two interrelated levels: platforms enhance activist outreach while concurrently increasing the surveillance capabilities of state and corporate entities. This dynamic corroborates Tufekci's (2017) assertion that although networked protests are effective in mobilisation, they frequently exhibit fragility in resilience, a vulnerability that authorities exploit via adaptive surveillance. In the African context, this paradox is intensified by inadequate legal protections, fragile democratic institutions, and corporate moderation practices that disregard local political realities (Afunugo, 2024).

A Decolonial Analysis of Platform Governance

The comparative experiences of Nigeria and South Africa present a persuasive case for a decolonial analysis of platform government. Both instances demonstrate the significant consequences of reliance on global platforms whose structures and governance frameworks are designed in the Global North, resulting in essential discrepancies with African contexts.

Algorithmic Bias: The dissemination of xenophobic propaganda on Facebook in South Africa illustrates how algorithms designed under Euro-American cultural paradigms inadequately comprehend and address context-specific problems, frequently exacerbating local animosities.

Moderation Discrepancies: The enforcement of universal "community standards" by platforms like as Twitter often leads to the suppression of African voices, as local linguistic subtleties and valid political discourse are erroneously categorised as detrimental (Afunugo, 2024).

Policy Disjunction: A distinct divergence exists between Western policy advocacy for platform responsibility and African state requirements for content regulation. Platforms inconsistently enforce their regulations amid the friction between foreign governments and local authorities (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2022; Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024, p. 200).

This governance dependency illustrates what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describes as a condition of epistemic reliance, wherein foreign frameworks are enforced without consideration for the local environment. A decolonial framework necessitates the reclamation of African agency in digital governance. This involves creating multilingual moderation systems, funding local fact-checking initiatives, and enhancing continental regulatory frameworks, like those suggested by the African Union, that claim sovereignty over digital environments and tailor governance to the unique needs and intricacies of African societies.

Advancing Beyond Technological Determinism

The contrasting results of Nigeria's #EndSARS movement and the unrest in South Africa illustrate the role of social media as a mediating infrastructure rather than a deterministic influence. The observed outcomes are contingent upon demographic factors, political contexts, and historical legacies. The dynamics of Nigeria's youthful demographic, coupled with the repressive measures of an authoritarian regime, have influenced the emergence of decentralised protest movements. In contrast, South Africa's older population, characterised by economic stratification and a system of negotiated governance, has led to the development of factionalised forms of unrest.

This complexity poses a challenge to digital political theories that are centred in Western perspectives, necessitating a nuanced understanding that is sensitive to the intricate interactions of technology, power, and historical context within the African continent.

Theoretical Implications

This comparative investigation delineates three substantial theoretical implications: The Networked Public Sphere necessitates a redefinition to accurately represent the fragmented and partial characteristics of publics shaped by infrastructure inequalities and the designs of digital platforms. Framing Theory (Historically Embedded) demonstrates that the examination of frames in African crises extends beyond their role as strategic tools; they are fundamentally anchored in historical contexts, gaining legitimacy from the legacies of colonial and postcolonial experiences. The interplay between activism and surveillance reveals a paradox that functions

on both global and local scales, emphasising the intrinsic link between digital activism and surveillance techniques. The contradiction in Africa is worsened by inadequate protections, authoritarian tendencies, and reliance on foreign-owned platforms.

Practical Implications

The findings additionally highlight crucial practical considerations: Digital literacy efforts are crucial in Nigeria and South Africa to improve citizens' capacity to recognise and counter disinformation effectively. Multilingual moderation requires platforms to invest in the creation of natural language processing techniques tailored for indigenous African languages. This investment is essential for efficiently overseeing misinformation and guaranteeing the representation of disadvantaged voices in research and policy development. Furthermore, it is essential for the African Union to spearhead the development of a comprehensive continental framework that encompasses digital rights, crisis communication, and platform accountability. Moreover, civil society innovation via local civic technology projects might create alternative infrastructures for accountability, thus reducing dependence on foreign platforms.

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Nigeria's #EndSARS movement and the July 2021 unrest in South Africa demonstrates that the impact of social media on African crises is marked by duality and contextual reliance. Digital platforms lack inherent traits of liberation or devastation; instead, their impacts depend on the intricate interplay of technology progress, demographic variables, political structures, and historical circumstances.

This study emphasises the necessity of decolonising digital scholarship from a theoretical perspective. The intricacies of crises in Africa cannot be sufficiently comprehended solely through Western paradigms. In this setting, digital publics demonstrate fragmentation, the historical embedding of frameworks is apparent, and the connection between activism and surveillance is inherently linked. The report highlights the essential requirement for governance structures spearheaded by African organisations that protect rights, counter misinformation, and guarantee accountability among platforms.

The persistent issues of political instability, economic disparity, and democratic changes in Africa highlight the essential significance of governance concerning digital platforms. The function of social media as a tool for accountability and inclusion or as a means of division and repression depends on the choices made currently by diverse stakeholders, including governments, platforms, civil society, and individual citizens. Effectively addressing this paradox is essential for Africa's digital future and the broader objective of reimagining global communication in a decolonial and democratic framework.

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