

Legitimizing State Control: President Tinubu's Discourse on Social Media Regulation

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of President Bola Tinubu's pronouncements on social media, specifically his characterization of it as a "menace" necessitating regulation. Applying Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, the analysis reveals how Tinubu constructs a threat narrative, portraying social media as undermining truth and national unity. This narrative is supported by his assertion of epistemic authority, positioning himself as the arbiter of "truth" and legitimizing government intervention. Furthermore, the discourse mobilizes nationalistic sentiment, framing regulation as a patriotic duty. This study exposes the underlying power dynamics and ideological agendas driving the push for social media regulation in Nigeria, highlighting potential risks to freedom of expression and democratic participation. By analyzing the interplay of language, power, and technology, this research contributes to debates on online governance, free speech, and the balance between public good and individual freedoms in the digital age.

Keywords: social media, menace, political language, free speech

Introduction:

Social media has revolutionized Nigeria, becoming a powerful tool for political and social engagement. It has empowered citizens to participate in public discourse, mobilize for social causes, and challenge government narratives. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have given a voice to the voiceless, enabling ordinary people to share information, contest the status quo, and participate in civic life (Oloyede & Aluko, 2020). This participatory capacity was dramatically visible during the #EndSARS protests, when social media amplified grassroots organizing, transmitted real-time information, and drew sustained international attention to local grievances (Adeyanju & Oriola, 2021). By circumventing traditional media gatekeepers, especially in moments of crisis, Nigerians, particularly young people have leveraged digital platforms to recast public debate (Obadare, 2016). Yet this democratization has also complicated governance: waves of misinformation and competing "alternative facts" have at times fuelled unrest, deepened mistrust in institutions, and strained policy-making (Akanle et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the presidency's rhetoric has increasingly foregrounded the risks of unregulated online discourse. At a recent book launch, President Bola Tinubu framed social media as a "post-truth" arena saturated by "alternative facts," warning that unchecked virality

threatens national cohesion and therefore invites regulatory response. His language positions governance as a corrective to informational disorder, signaling an emergent policy logic in which public order and epistemic stability become central justifications for intervention (Fairclough, 2003). This emphasis on risk is now complemented by a second, closely related strand of presidential discourse delivered at a Digital Media Summit, where Tinubu both celebrated digital opportunity and codified ethical expectations for participation. There, he praised platforms for their capacity to “empower young people, stimulate economic growth, and shape the nation’s future,” but simultaneously urged creators to “use your platforms, not only for self-expression, anger or retaliation, but for problem-solving, to mentor others as we grow.” He issued a procedural norm “Verify before you amplify,” and proposed that the digital sphere should reflect “the values that bind us together as a people: honesty, compassion, discipline, and patriotism.” The speech also reframed oversight as rights-protection “Every Nigerian has a right to be protected in both the physical and digital domains”, and advanced a co-responsibility formula: “As our digital ecosystem grows, so must our collective responsibility to ensure safety, trust and accountability.”

Taken together, these two moments of presidential address outline a coherent narrative arc: social media is indispensable to development and voice, yet perilous when decoupled from verification, virtue, and security. The Digital Media Summit text, in particular, translates regulatory intent into ethical and procedural terms (values, verification, accountability), positioning users as civic actors who should internalize norms even as the state promises infrastructure and cybersecurity. In parallel, presidential aides have characterized the information environment as electorally consequential “battlegrounds,” a metaphor that heightens the stakes of platform governance in an era defined globally as “post-truth” (McIntyre, 2018; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The cumulative effect is to prefigure regulation as protection, recasting content moderation and state oversight as instruments for safeguarding cohesion, truth, and democratic stability.

This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interrogate how presidential language accomplishes that reframing. By analyzing Tinubu’s rhetoric across these two speeches—the book-launch remarks that stressed “post-truth” risk and the Digital Media Summit address that coupled empowerment with “verify before you amplify,” virtues, rights, and “collective responsibility”—the paper examines how authority, citizenship, and governance are discursively aligned to justify present and future interventions in Nigeria’s digital sphere. In doing so, it illuminates the power dynamics and ideological positions that shape contemporary policy talk on media freedom and regulation in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Nigeria’s digital sphere is central to civic participation, yet presidential communication, specifically, President Tinubu portrays social media as a ‘risk’ ‘battleground’ or ‘threat’ to national cohesion and electoral integrity often described as a ‘menace’ that must be controlled. Scholarship has not satisfactorily examined how Tinubu performs this reframing: how specific linguistic choices, metaphors, and narrative structures define social media as a menace, threat and risk. The ambiguity between protection and control obscures implications for freedom of expression, public trust, and the terms of democratic debate.

This study addresses that gap by applying Critical Discourse Analysis to a corpus of President Tinubu’s speeches from 2024–2025, with particular attention to a book launch and Digital Media Summit remarks. Using Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, this research aims to map the

discursive strategies that define social media and its users; and identify how authority, citizenship, and regulation are linguistically aligned.

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to show how President Tinubu's framing of social media as "societal menace" implicates freedom of expression and governance in Nigeria.

The specific objectives are to:

- i) examine how the president's position intersects with broader global trends in internet regulation.
- ii) explore the implication of strict social media control on individual freedom of expression and access to information in Nigeria.
- iii) determine the effect of the president's position on the balance between political control, democratic freedom and public trust in Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- How does President Tinubu's framing of social media as a "societal menace" intersect with broader global trends in internet regulation?
- What potential impacts could stricter social media regulations have on political discourse and freedom of expression in Nigeria?
- What are the implications of President Tinubu's discourse on social media regulation for political discourse and public trust in Nigeria?

Significance of Study

The significance of this study is to critically examine President Bola Tinubu's position on social media regulation and its implications for freedom of expression, political discourse, and governance in Nigeria. Focusing on a book-launch and Digital Media Summit speeches as key data points, the analysis explores how regulation is framed through the lexicon of rights, values, verification, and security, and how these frames may affect citizen access to information, the balance between public order and democratic freedoms, and the scope of governmental control over digital spaces. Scholarly significance lies in extending debates in digital governance and CDA by showing how language and power interact to normalize regulatory trajectories in a developing democracy. The study also situates Nigeria's experience within global concerns about misinformation and "post-truth" communication (McIntyre, 2018; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), tracing how these challenges localize in a context where social media is simultaneously an engine of participation and a site of anxiety for state actors.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on President Tinubu's public communication on social media regulation between 2024 and 2025, treating the book-launch remarks and the Digital Media Summit addresses. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional approach, the analysis first examines the text itself: the use of pronouns, lexical choices, metaphors, and rhetorical patterning to show how risk, responsibility, and protection are linguistically constructed. It then considers discursive practice by situating these speeches in their production and circulation contexts; finally, it places the findings in social context, showing how appeals to development, security, and rights help normalize stricter oversight. The corpus is limited to verified presidential speeches; civil-society

reactions, opposition commentary, among other epistemic reviews. The goal is to explicate how Tinubu's rhetoric organizes meanings and consent around social media governance in Nigeria during the period.

Literature Review:

Recent years have witnessed social media dramatically reshape Nigeria's political landscape. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have empowered citizens to engage in political discussions, advocate for change, and hold leaders accountable. This digital revolution, extensively explored in academic research, offers both promise and peril for Nigeria's socio-political environment (Olayiwola, 2021).

Social media has emerged as a potent tool for political mobilization and engagement, especially among the youth. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have become vital for disseminating political information and encouraging youth participation in democratic processes. This is particularly significant as young Nigerians often feel marginalized by traditional political structures, turning to digital platforms for expression.

Social media has empowered Nigerian citizens to engage in political discourse, enabling a two-way exchange of ideas between the government and the governed. Okoro and Nwafor (2013) emphasize that social media has democratized access to information and allowed marginalized voices to participate actively in political dialogues. During key events, such as the #EndSARS movement in 2020, social media served as a powerful tool for mobilizing protest against police brutality, illustrating how digital platforms amplify citizen demands and can challenge government power (Akinwotu, 2020; Iwilade, 2021).

Social media also enables more immediate and widespread engagement with political issues. Egbunike and Onyemelukwe (2016) discuss how platforms like Twitter serve as a "public sphere" for Nigerians, where citizens and political figures alike can debate, influence, and respond to national issues in real time. These dynamic fosters a more interactive form of political engagement, shifting traditional power dynamics and making the government more accountable to public sentiment (Salawu, 2020).

While social media provides a channel for constructive discourse, it has also been implicated in the spread of misinformation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, false information about treatments and prevention measures circulated widely on Nigerian social media, exacerbating public health challenges (Balogun et al., 2021). Similarly, misinformation in the political realm can distort public opinion, influence elections, and exacerbate social tensions (Nwachukwu & Ezeibe, 2022). The spread of "alternative facts" in political discourse, as observed in President Tinubu's speech, reflects a global phenomenon often referred to as "post-truth," where appeals to personal belief and identity are prioritized over objective facts (McIntyre, 2018). In Nigeria, misinformation often exploits ethnic, religious, or regional divides, complicating efforts to establish a cohesive national identity (Oriola, 2022). Therefore, understanding the impacts of misinformation on political discourse is crucial in examining the government's rationale for proposing regulations. The Nigerian government's stance on social media has oscillated between recognition of its utility and concerns over its potential for harm. According to Uwalaka and Watkins (2018), authorities have justified calls for regulation by citing the negative effects of misinformation, hate speech, and the potential for social unrest. These concerns were echoed in the 2019 Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations Bill, which sought to criminalize the spread of "false" information online by imposing penalties of up to ₦300,000 or three years, imprisonment for individuals and up to ₦10 million for organizations. The draft also empowered

law enforcement to issue correction or stop-transmission directives and, via the NCC, to order ISPs to block access to offending online locations—non-compliant ISPs risked fines up to ₦10 million. This bill was heavily criticized for potentially infringing on freedom of expression, with civil society groups arguing it could be used to silence dissent (Ndukwe, 2018; Oriola, 2022).

President Tinubu's recent statements on the need for social media regulation echo these concerns, suggesting that unregulated platforms could undermine national stability by fostering public discourse based on "alternative facts." However, critics argue that such regulatory efforts could stifle political engagement and limit the democratic potential of social media (Akinwotu, 2020; Iwilade, 2021). The tension between security concerns and freedom of expression remains a central challenge in Nigeria's approach to social media governance.

The debate around social media regulation in Nigeria highlights the tension between curbing harmful content and preserving citizens' freedom of expression. While regulation can prevent the spread of harmful information, overly restrictive policies could stifle democratic values and discourage citizen participation in online discourse. A balanced approach that empowers users through digital literacy programs may be a more effective solution than stringent regulatory measures. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a framework explores how social media shapes power relations in Nigerian political discourse. CDA theorists, such as Fairclough (2001) and Van Dijk (2008), argue that language on digital platforms can reinforce or challenge power structures. Social media enables citizens to reclaim discursive power, allowing marginalized voices to critique and question state narratives (Salawu, 2020). The rise of hashtags like #RevolutionNow and #EndSARS exemplifies how digital discourse can disrupt traditional media-controlled narratives, challenging state authority. This highlights CDA's relevance in understanding social media's impact on political discourse (Adeniran, 2020).

The question of how to balance the benefits of social media with the risks posed by misinformation remains complex. Scholars such as Morozov (2011) warn that state-led regulation often prioritizes control over citizen empowerment, potentially curbing democratic freedoms. In Nigeria, social media regulation poses risks to political participation, as platforms have been instrumental in mobilizing citizens and amplifying dissenting voices (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018; Iwilade, 2021). Any regulatory measures should be carefully crafted to avoid curtailing citizens' rights to freedom of expression and access to information, which are cornerstones of democratic society (Balogun et al., 2021).

Methodology

This research employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary methodological framework to analyze President Bola Tinubu's speech on social media regulation, specifically his recent remarks framing social media as a "menace" in need of control. The study aims to uncover underlying ideological perspectives, power dynamics, and language strategies used to shape public opinion and justify regulatory measures. CDA is particularly suitable for analyzing political discourse as it highlights the relationships between language, power, and ideology, making it an ideal approach for examining the political implications of Tinubu's position on social media (Fairclough, 2001; Wodak, 2011). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a multidisciplinary approach that scrutinizes how discourse reinforces social structures and power relations. Rooted in the work of scholars like Fairclough (2001), Van Dijk (2008), and Wodak (2011), CDA goes beyond the literal meaning of text to examine the implicit power dynamics and ideological underpinnings of language. CDA allows researchers to analyze political discourse by investigating how language shapes, what it is shaped by, sociopolitical contexts,

making it effective for this study of political rhetoric on social media regulation.

Tinubu's speech serves as a compelling case study for several reasons. First, as Nigeria's president, his stance on social media regulation exposes not only personal opinions but also state-backed policy inclinations. The choice of Tinubu's remarks specifically allows for an examination of how political elites frame digital platforms in ways that influence public sentiment and potentially guide policy-making.

Data Collection and Analytical Framework

The study gathers primary data from the official transcript of Tinubu's speech, supplemented by related statements from Nigerian policymakers to contextualize his stance within broader governmental narratives on social media. The study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, which includes textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 2001). Each of these dimensions helps examine the text's linguistic features, the context of production, and the socio-political implications.

1. Text Analysis

This analysis utilizes Norman Fairclough's tripartite framework for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to meticulously dissect President Tinubu's pronouncements on social media regulation, delivered through his chief of staff, Femi Gbajabiamila. This framework provides a robust lens through which to scrutinize the intricate interplay between language, power, and ideology, elucidating how linguistic strategies are deployed to construct a particular narrative and legitimize specific socio-political agendas.

a) Use of Pronoun and agency distribution

Tinubu in his speech constructs a clear division between responsible leaders and the general public in their approach to information and discourse. He positions himself and the government as the voice of reason, committed to "evidence-based discourse and data-reliant decision-making," while subtly portraying the public as susceptible to "emotive arguments" and "alternative facts." This dichotomy is evident in the following excerpt:

"But as citizens interested in the issues of state and governance, the obligation is even more significant to ensure that our engagement with each other springs from a shared agreement on what truth is, what is real and what isn't." This assertion implies that citizens are currently engaging in discourse devoid of a shared epistemological foundation, implicitly attributing the perceived disarray in public discourse to their susceptibility to misinformation and emotional reasoning. In the second speech, authority opens the exchange "I challenge you", a presidential voice authorizing an agenda; then agency is personalized "you" should use platforms for problem-solving and mentorship", and finally accountability is collectivized in an inclusive register "we are in a world... our digital ecosystem". In Fairclough's terms, the text simultaneously enacts authority, identifies citizens as responsible actors, and represents the digital sphere as a common space requiring joint stewardship. In van Dijk's socio-cognitive frame, this sequencing rehearses a mental model in which users do not merely express themselves; they perform civic functions and are expected to internalize norms before they post.

b) Negative Lexicalization and Semantic Framing of Social Media

The speech consistently employs negative language when referring to social media. Terms like "menace," "abuse," "false realities," "confuse and deceive," and "distort perceptions" paint a

picture of social media as a dangerous and unreliable source of information. This negative portrayal aims to create anxiety and fear around social media, making the public more receptive to the idea of regulation. The phrase “social media is a menace” is a powerful metaphor which frames social media as a threat to societal stability. This linguistic choice carries connotations of danger, disruption, and urgency, justifying regulatory actions. “Social media is a menace and must be regulated... In this new world, public discourse is driven by alternative facts, dropped with reckless abandon on social media ...”

This opening statement immediately sets the tone for the entire speech, framing social media as a problem that needs to be addressed. Also, expressions such as “reckless abandon” and “false realities” intensify the perception of chaos and misinformation on digital platforms, anchoring the discourse in fear and distrust. In the second speech, metaphors is used to structure perception: engine and battleground. Two master metaphors organize the cognitive map. First, ‘social media as machine’: an industrial metaphor foregrounding efficiency, innovation, and growth, especially for youth and entrepreneurship - “social media is a powerful engine of communication, information, innovation, and influence. Second, social media as battleground: a militarized metaphor emphasizing contest, risk, and strategic manipulation in electoral contexts - ‘a battleground where elections are won or lost. The pair creates a dual schema: of utility and threat that justifies vigilance without disowning innovation.

Also, Tinubu repeatedly stresses the importance of a shared understanding of “truth” and “reality.” This emphasis serves to create a sense of urgency and crisis, suggesting that these fundamental concepts are under attack due to the unregulated nature of social media.

“We live in what some observers have described as a post-truth world. This is a world where nothing is real, politics is fuelled by emotive arguments, and objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to identity and personal belief.”

By presenting a seemingly objective view of a “post-truth world,” Tinubu subtly positions himself as the defender of truth and reality, further legitimizing his call for regulation.

c) Appeals to Authority and Expertise

The first speech strategically invokes the “scholarly rigour” and “wealth of experience” of Babatunde Fashola, whose book is being launched at the event. By highlighting Fashola's credentials and presenting his book as a source of “research and data analysis,” Tinubu bolsters his argument for regulation with an air of authority and expertise. “In his usual style, he has approached the subject with an abundance of scholarly rigour, bringing his considerable intellect, wealth of experience, and passionate patriotism to a critical subject matter that has been too long ignored.” This appeal to authority subtly suggests that the government's position is based on sound evidence and expert opinion, discouraging any potential opposition or dissent.

The second speech builds legitimacy by stacking multiple layers of authority and expertise: presidential ethos, institutional setting, expert voices, and comparative evidence. It is delivered by the head of state at the State House during a themed policy forum—“Unveiling the Critical Role of New Media in National Development” which signals institutional and technocratic purpose. The President’s voice issues directives—“I challenge you to use your platforms... for problem-solving” and “Verify before you amplify”—that carry weight precisely because they are presidential imperatives in a state venue.

Authority is also borrowed from specialized policy domains. Technical registers such as “investing in digital infrastructure,” “cybersecurity,” “digital ecosystem” frame the issue as one requiring expert management. “Every Nigerian has a right to be protected in both the physical

and digital domains.”, this statement yokes security expertise to constitutional legitimacy. The speech strategically imports third-party expertise through advisers who cite international precedent. The Special Adviser asserts, “Our recent experiences and those from elections in the USA, Germany, and other countries have taught us a crucial lesson,” and reclassifies platforms as decisive arenas: “Digital media are... battlegrounds where elections are won or lost.” Comparative reference functions as evidence by analogy: if advanced democracies face these risks, Nigerian vigilance is reasonable.

d) Patriotic Framing

Tinubu skillfully connects the issue of social media regulation with national progress and stability by using patriotic language. He refers to “our children's future,” “our country's prospects,” and “the cause of our nationhood,” framing the regulation of social media as a necessary step to safeguard the nation's interests. “Amidst this global turmoil, we are at home confronted by difficult public policy choices and decisions that must be made to ensure our children’s future and our country’s prospects.” This statement subtly implies that those who oppose social media regulation are hindering the nation's progress and jeopardizing the future of its children. Patriotism is operationalized as civic labour. The President’s injunction “I challenge you to use your platforms... not only for self-expression, anger or retaliation, but for problem-solving, to mentor others as we grow”, reframes expressive freedom as service to the community. The follow-on rule, “Verify before you amplify,” converts fact-checking into a patriotic habit, reinforced by the inclusive cadence of “as our digital ecosystem grows, so must our collective responsibility to ensure safety, trust and accountability.” State protection is folded into this patriotic frame through ‘rights’ discourse: “Every Nigerian has a right to be protected in both the physical and digital domains”.

2. Discursive Practice

This dimension goes beyond the text itself to consider the social or political context in which it was produced and how this context influences its meaning and reception.

a) Political Context

Tinubu's remarks must be understood within the context of growing concerns about misinformation and “fake news” on social media, particularly in relation to elections and political discourse. This context creates a fertile ground for a narrative that emphasizes the dangers of unregulated online spaces and the need for government intervention. Furthermore, the speech comes at a time when many governments around the world are grappling with the challenges posed by social media. This global trend towards increased regulation of online spaces provides a supportive backdrop for Tinubu's pronouncements.

The second speech set at the State House and framed by the theme “Unveiling the Critical Role of New Media in National Development,” the summit situates digital media squarely within Nigeria’s governance agenda. The adviser’s warning that “Digital media are no longer just spaces for jokes, memes, or dance videos. They are battlegrounds where elections are won or lost,” explicitly ties the discourse to electoral integrity “ahead of the 2027 elections.” The President’s claims that platforms can “promote unity, innovation, and fast-tracking national development” place regulation and digital conduct within a nation-building horizon, not merely a tech-policy niche.

b) Power Dynamics

As the President of Nigeria, Tinubu wields significant power and influence. His statements on social media regulation carry weight and can shape public debate and policy decisions. This power dynamic is implicit throughout the speech, where he positions himself as a leader who must guide the nation towards a "shared agreement on what truth is."

This assertion of authority highlights the inherent power imbalance between the government and the public when it comes to regulating online spaces. It also raises concerns about the potential for censorship and the suppression of dissenting voices.

The directive "I challenge you to use your platforms... for problem-solving" individualizes responsibility, while "as our digital ecosystem grows, so must our collective responsibility to ensure safety, trust and accountability" collectivizes accountability. Simultaneously, the state claims guardianship over the terrain: "We will not lose focus on cybersecurity. Every Nigerian has a right to be protected in both the physical and digital domains." That rights language legitimizes a stronger state footprint online as protection and subtle control.

c) Ideological Underpinnings

The first speech reflects a particular ideology that prioritizes stability, order, and control. It suggests that a strong government hand is necessary to regulate public discourse and ensure that citizens adhere to a shared understanding of truth and reality. This ideology can be seen as a reaction to the perceived chaos and fragmentation of online spaces, which are often viewed as a threat to established power structures. This emphasis on control and stability aligns with a more authoritarian approach to governance, where the government plays a central role in shaping public opinion and maintaining social order.

The second speech treats the internet as a tool to build the country. Online speech is "good" when it helps "unity," "innovation," and "national development," and when it shows "honesty, compassion, discipline, and patriotism." In other words, your posts should serve the community and the nation. Oversight is framed as protection owed to citizens: "Every Nigerian has a right to be protected in both the physical and digital domains." So, monitoring and cybersecurity aren't sold as control, but as the state doing its duty to keep people safe.

d) Audience and Reception

The speech was delivered at a book launch attended by government officials, intellectuals, and members of the media. This audience is likely to be more receptive to Tinubu's message, given their roles in shaping public discourse and policy. However, the speech may be met with resistance from civil society organizations, human rights activists, and ordinary citizens who see social media regulation as a threat to freedom of expression and democratic participation.

Similarly, the audience for Digital Summit speech was purposely mixed: "top government officials, youth associations, tech experts, media strategists, NGOs, and civil society groups", so the message could spread through government, industry, and community life.

Officials and strategists - The clear takeaway is that strong verification and cybersecurity are essentials for clean elections and steady development.

Youths and creators -They are being asked to act as mentors and problem-solvers—"amplify... voices" responsibly and "verify before you amplify."

The diverse reactions to the speeches highlight the contested nature of social media regulation and the need for a nuanced and inclusive debate that takes into account the perspectives of all stakeholders.

3. Social Practice

This dimension examines how the discourse contributes to wider social structures and power relations within Nigerian society.

a) Legitimizing State Control

The speech can be interpreted as an attempt to legitimize increased state control over online spaces. By framing social media as a threat to national unity and stability, Tinubu creates a justification for government intervention. This has significant implications for freedom of expression and the democratic right to dissent, as it opens the door for censorship and the suppression of critical voices. This move towards greater state control reflects a broader trend in many countries, where governments are increasingly seeking to regulate online spaces in the name of national security, public order, or combating misinformation.

The speech presents state oversight of the digital sphere as a protective duty owed to citizens, not as coercion. By asserting that “Every Nigerian has a right to be protected in both the physical and digital domains,” the presidency translates surveillance, cybersecurity, and possible regulation into the language of rights fulfillment. This is reinforced by a steady promise of vigilance “We will not lose focus on cybersecurity” as it normalizes a permanent state presence online as part of public safety.

b) Reinforcing Elite Power

Authority is consolidated through setting, voice, and borrowed expertise. The message is delivered from the State House under a technocratic banner and voiced by the President, his Special Adviser, and Special Assistant, thus, producing a chorus that aligns political leadership, policy strategy, and operational messaging. Technical registers: “investing in digital infrastructure,” “digital ecosystem,” “cybersecurity”, cast experts as gatekeepers of what counts as responsible speech, while comparative references such as: “experiences... in the USA, Germany”, lend global legitimacy to local intentions. The presidential injunction, “I challenge you to use your platforms... for problem-solving,” ultimately positions elites to define the proper purpose of citizen speech. The speeches reinforce the power of political elites to define “truth” and “reality.” By positioning himself as the arbiter of these concepts, Tinubu asserts his authority to shape public discourse and control the flow of information. This can contribute to the marginalization of alternative voices and perspectives, particularly those that challenge the dominant narratives promoted by the government.

c) Shaping Social Norms

The speech contributes to the construction of social norms around online behavior. By emphasizing the importance of “evidence-based discourse” and “data-reliant decision-making,” it implicitly discourages the expression of emotions, personal beliefs, and alternative perspectives. This can lead to a chilling effect on online speech and stifle public debate, as people may become hesitant to express views that deviate from the officially sanctioned “truth.” The speech works to reset everyday expectations of online behavior by moralizing participation and scripting simple rules. It asks that “the digital space reflect the values that bind us together... honesty, compassion, discipline, and patriotism,” turning virtues into a practical code for posting. The memorable instruction “Verify before you amplify” furnishes a ready-to-use checkpoint that newsrooms, influencers, and ordinary users can internalize.

This shaping of social norms can have a profound impact on the way people interact and communicate online, potentially leading to a more conformist and less diverse online

environment.

d) Impact on Social Change

The regulation of social media can have significant implications for social change movements that rely on online platforms to mobilize support and challenge existing power structures. By welcoming users to “amplify their voices” when tied to “unity, innovation, and national development,” the speech channels activism toward reformist, solution-oriented work, advocacy that mentors, solves problems, and fits the value charter. Also, by restricting online spaces, the government can limit the ability of these movements to organize and disseminate information, potentially hindering their effectiveness. This potential impact on social change underscores the importance of protecting online spaces as arenas for free expression, dissent, and the mobilization of collective action. This analysis reveals the complex and multi-layered nature of Tinubu's remarks on social media regulation. The speech is not merely a neutral call for responsible online behavior but rather a strategic intervention that serves to legitimize state control, reinforce elite power, and shape social norms around online communication. While concerns about misinformation and the spread of “fake news” are valid, it is crucial to recognize the potential dangers of social media regulation. Any regulatory measures must be carefully crafted to protect freedom of expression, promote democratic participation, and safeguard the rights of marginalized groups.

Summary of Findings

This critical discourse analysis of President Tinubu's remarks on social media regulation reveals a calculated effort to shape public perception and legitimize increased state control over online spaces. Four key themes emerge from the analysis:

1. **Construction of a Threat Narrative:** The discourse strategically constructs social media as a menacing force that undermines truth, erodes societal stability, and jeopardizes national unity. This threat narrative is achieved through the pejorative lexicalization of social media, the reification of “truth” and “reality,” and the subtle portrayal of the public as susceptible to manipulation and misinformation. This creates a sense of urgency and fear, making the public more receptive to the idea of government intervention.
2. **Assertion of Epistemic Authority:** Tinubu positions himself and the government as the guardians of truth and objectivity, implicitly claiming the authority to define “reality” and regulate online discourse. This assertion of epistemic authority is reinforced through appeals to expertise, invoking the scholarly credentials of Babatunde Fashola and presenting his book as empirical evidence. This strategy serves to bolster the government's position and preempt potential dissent.
3. **Mobilization of Nationalistic Sentiment:** The discourse skillfully connects social media regulation with national progress and stability, framing it as a patriotic duty to safeguard the nation's interests. This is achieved through the use of patriotic lexicon and the subtle implication that those who oppose regulation are hindering national development and jeopardizing the future of the country. This strategy aims to mobilize public support for the government's agenda and silence potential opposition.

4. Legitimization of State Control: The analysis reveals a clear intent to legitimize increased state control over online spaces under the guise of combating misinformation and protecting national unity. This is achieved through the construction of a threat narrative, the assertion of epistemic authority, and the mobilization of nationalistic sentiment. This strategy raises concerns about the potential curtailment of freedom of expression, the reinforcement of existing power imbalances, and the suppression of dissenting voices.

Conclusion

This analysis highlights the dual-edged nature of regulatory discourse: while addressing genuine concerns about misinformation, it also addresses the concern for consolidating power and suppressing dissent. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, the research examines the linguistic and ideological aspects of Tinubu's speech, revealing how language can shape power dynamics and public attitudes towards social media. The study begins by acknowledging social media's role in Nigeria - as a tool for democracy as it encourages free speech. It then analyzes Tinubu's rhetoric, which frames social media as a danger to national unity and truth, justifying increased government control. The methodology section explains why Critical Discourse Analysis is the appropriate tool to uncover hidden ideologies in political texts. The discussion illuminated the intricate ways in which language is strategically employed to construct a narrative that legitimizes social media regulation, reinforces existing power structures, and potentially curtails freedom of expression and democratic participation. While concerns about misinformation and the need for responsible online behavior are valid, it is imperative to critically examine the discursive strategies employed to justify increased state control over online spaces.

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Appendix

Appendix 1

“Social media is a menace and must be regulated...”

“Perhaps that’s a change in mindset,” Tinubu, speaking through his chief of staff, said in his opening remarks, even as he recounted several abuses of the social media.

However, delivering his speech, he said, “We are living through one of the most fraught periods in modern human history. The world is changing all around us.

“The international settlements underpinning the global order since the end of the Second World War are being renegotiated in real time across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

“Amidst this global turmoil, we are at home confronted by difficult public policy choices and decisions that must be made to ensure our children’s future and our country’s prospects.

“In this historical moment, as we confront and overcome the challenges that threaten our future, we have an obligation as leaders in politics and government to engage in evidence-based discourse and data-reliant decision-making as a matter of course.

“But as citizens interested in the issues of state and governance, the obligation is even more significant to ensure that our engagement with each other springs from a shared agreement on what truth is, what is real and what isn’t.

“We live in what some observers have described as a post-truth world.

“This is a world where nothing is real, politics is fuelled by emotive arguments, and objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to identity and personal belief.

“In this new world, public discourse is driven by alternative facts, dropped with reckless abandon on social media and technology, including artificial intelligence tools, allowing for the creation of false realities to confuse and deceive people and distort perceptions of what is real and what isn’t.” - <https://www.mangrovepen.ng/2024/02/10/tinubu-social-media-is-a-menace-it-must-be-regulated/>

Appendix 2.

“Your generation has recognised this moment. You are using digital tools to innovate, educate, and demand accountability. But as your influence grows, so must our collective sense of purpose and responsibility.

“I urge you to continue using digital platforms to advance our nation’s progress. Build businesses that employ others. Create content that uplifts and unites. Use your influence to foster unity, not division...” - <https://statehouse.gov.ng/news/president-tinubu-to-new-media-influencers-use-your-influence-to-foster-unity-not-division-verify-before-amplifying/>