

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	624
Land:	Nigeria
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the Net 2022 – Nigeria
Udgivet:	18. oktober 2022
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	15. december 2022

Document #2081818

Freedom House

Freedom on the Net 2022 - Nigeria

PARTLY FREE

57

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

59 / 100 Partly Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the [research methodology](#) and [report acknowledgements](#).

Overview

Internet freedom remains under threat in Nigeria. After Twitter censored a tweet by President Buhari that seemingly threatened violence against Biafran secessionists, the Nigerian government blocked Twitter on most networks for seven months. Legislation that would reshape the legal landscape for internet content in Nigeria, including a data protection bill and a bill that would expand intermediary liability for service providers, remained under consideration at the end of the coverage period. In a positive development, the Nigerian government halted efforts to advance legislation that would have required social media companies to register with state regulators. Online journalists continue to be subjected to extralegal harassment and intimidation.

Separately, the country has made significant improvements in the competitiveness and quality of national elections, though irregularities persist. Corruption remains endemic, particularly in the petroleum industry, a key economic sector. Security challenges, including the ongoing ethnoreligious crisis, insurgency by the Boko Haram militant group, as well as communal and sectarian violence in the restive Middle Belt region, threaten the human rights of millions of Nigerians. The response of the military and law enforcement agencies to the widespread insecurity often involves extrajudicial killings, torture, and other abuses.

Key Developments, June 1, 2021 - May 31, 2022

- In June 2021, the government blocked Twitter on most major networks after the platform censored a tweet by President Buhari that seemingly threatened violence against Biafran secessionists. The ban was lifted in January 2022, after, the government claims, Twitter agreed to several conditions, including setting up an office in the country and appointing a country representative; Twitter has not confirmed the government's claims (see B1).
- In June 2022, after the coverage period, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA), released a draft Code of Practice for Computer Service Platforms and Internet Intermediaries, which would mandate that platforms take down content the government deemed “unlawful and prohibited” (see B2).
- There were fewer reported cases of extralegal harassment and intimidation against journalists during the coverage period (see C7).
- Though cyberattacks continued during the coverage period, there were no reported technical attacks against media outlets or journalists (see C8).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? 2 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because one of the sources used to calculate internet penetration rates released new data indicating a lower rate than previously modeled.

Infrastructural challenges, including unreliable access to electricity, hamper both access to the internet and internet speeds. According to the Digital 2022 report, Nigeria had an internet penetration rate of 51 percent as of January 2022.¹ According to the Nigerian Communications Commissions (NCC), the number of internet subscriptions declined by 9 million from January 2021 to December 2021.²

The government’s new National Broadband Plan (2020–25) (NBP), which replaced the 2013–18 plan, aims to expand broadband penetration to 70 percent by 2025.³ As of May 2022, the NCC reported a broadband penetration rate of 43.7 percent.⁴

According to NCC data, the number of fixed telephone connections per 100 people slightly improved to 102.4 percent in December 2021, though it is still less than the number of connections reported in November 2020.⁵ Some analysts attributed the initial decline to regulatory restrictions on the activation and replacement of SIM cards (see C4).⁶

In September 2021, the National Executive Council approved the rollout of fifth-generation (5G) services in Nigeria after a trial period in three major cities. At the end of the coverage period, the licensing process for 5G service providers was still ongoing.⁷

Vandalism and destruction of communication infrastructure is common, and persisted through the coverage period.⁸ Power cuts frequently disrupt service and access. According to the Minister of Communications and Digital Economy, mobile network operators experienced service disruptions in 16,000 instances between January and July 2021, likely due to fiber cuts and vandalism.⁹

Shortfalls in the power supply also undermine the quality of internet service offered by providers. Telecommunications base stations in Nigeria are typically powered by diesel generators, which reportedly account for 80 percent of their operating expenses.¹⁰ Separately, the need to pay for expensive backup generators has accelerated the closure of cybercafés that were already struggling to compete with increasing mobile internet access.

The average fixed broadband download speed is 16.78 Mbps and the average mobile download speed is 22.34 Mbps.¹¹ In 2019, the National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) released its Framework and Guidelines for Public Internet Access. The framework aimed to guarantee minimum quality standards and set other guidelines for shared connections.”¹²

In April 2022, Google announced that it would be berthing Equiano, the company’s subsea cable, in southwestern Nigeria. The company claims the cable connection will result in a six-fold increase in internet speeds in Nigeria.¹³

In 2018, the Association of Submarine Cable Operators of Nigeria (ASCON) was formed to “promote, encourage, and assist in the protection of subsea cable infrastructure and ancillary equipment and facilities from marine activities, man-made and natural hazards.”¹⁴

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the 1 / population for geographical, social, or other reasons? 3

Although significant digital divides around gender, geography, and language persist, affordable data services for mobile subscribers has increased internet access. In its 2021 Affordability Report, the Alliance for Affordable Internet ranked Nigeria 19 out of 72 low- and middle-income nations in the implementation of policies leading to affordable internet access.¹⁵ In March 2022, the cost of at least 1.5 gigabytes (GB) of data from MTN, Glo, and Airtel, the country’s most widely used internet service providers (ISPs), was \$2, compared to \$3.28 in February 2018.¹⁶

Cost remains a major impediment to internet access for many Nigerians in rural areas. Due to the unreliable electricity supply (see A1), those who can afford it often rely on private generators and standby battery-powered inverter systems to remain online during power outages.

In October 2019, the Minister of Communications and Digital Economy issued a directive through the NCC ordering telecommunications operators to reduce the cost of data and to stop illegal data reductions for consumers, but it has yet to be implemented.¹⁷

In 2016, the government introduced the Communication Service Tax Bill 2015, which would decrease the affordability of internet access by imposing a 9 percent tax on consumers for communications services including short-message service (SMS), data, and voice services.¹⁸ The bill was integrated to the Telecommunications Service Tax Bill 2016, which did not pass into law, and then into the Communication Tax Bill 2019,¹⁹ which passed through the first reading in February 2019 and awaits further consideration.²⁰

Nigeria’s internet landscape is characterized by a significant digital gender divide, and an urban-rural divide. According to the Inclusive Internet Index 2020 report, women in Nigeria are 22 percent less likely to access the internet than men.²¹ The electricity gap between urban and rural areas also creates internet access issues: 86 percent of Nigeria’s urban population has electricity, while just 34 percent of the rural population does.²²

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of 6 / restricting connectivity? 6

There were no restrictions on connectivity to the internet or mobile networks during the coverage period. Mobile network restrictions were last reported in 2014 and 2015 in three northern states during a state of emergency due to the Boko Haram insurgency.

The backbone connection to the international internet is decentralized, resulting in a climate of healthy competition with little government interference. Multiple players have built fiber networks that crisscross the country, including Phase 3, Glo 1, Main One, Suburban Telecom, Multilinks, and MTN. There are now five active internet exchange points (IXPs).^{[23](#)}

In October 2020, when Nigerians took to the streets to protest police brutality in the #EndSARS protests (see B8), there were concerns that the government would seek to disrupt internet connectivity. Civil society organizations like the Paradigm Initiative led advocacy efforts around internet shutdowns and conducted a public education campaign on circumvention and measurements tools.^{[24](#)}

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 5 / 6

There are no significant legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers in Nigeria.

The information and communications technology (ICT) market in Nigeria has expanded considerably over the past two decades, with the number of licensed ISPs growing from 18 in 2000 to 187 as of March 2022, though the growth of fixed-broadband providers has slowed in recent years with the rise in mobile access.^{[25](#)} Despite the large number of registered ISPs, there is a high degree of market concentration.^{[26](#)} Five privately owned mobile service providers also provide internet access: MTN, Globacom, Airtel, 9Mobile (formerly Etisalat), and NTEL, which began operations in 2016 after acquiring the license of the defunct national telephone service provider NITEL.^{[27](#)} In 2016, MTN acquired Visafone, securing access to its 800-megahertz (MHz) spectrum.^{[28](#)}

In May 2020, several states reduced or fully waived broadband right-of-way (RoW) charges, tariffs levied on telecommunications companies for each meter of cable built along state roads. High RoW charges can limit the expansion of broadband and restrict the entry of new providers to the market, or result in higher costs for subscribers. Earlier, in January 2020, 14 state governments increased their RoW charges by up to 1,000 percent, prompting a rebuke from the federal government.^{[29](#)}

The NITDA’s 2019 Framework and Guidelines for Public Internet Access is designed to regulate the provision and use of public internet access in Nigeria. According to the framework, public internet access points (PIAPs) are required to register with the NITDA and obtain approval from the body to carry out their operations.

Cybercafés are required to obtain licenses, but the large number of unlicensed cybercafés in operation suggests that the regulator has not enforced the requirement.^{[30](#)}

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a 2 / free, fair, and independent manner? 4

Regulatory bodies that oversee service providers have historically had a reputation for independence, though some actions by the NCC have called the body’s autonomy into question.^{[31](#)} The 2003 Nigeria Communications Act vests regulatory responsibility over the ICT sector with the NCC. The government nominates the NCC’s nine-member board of commissioners. The NCC’s current chief executive and executive vice chairman, Umar Garba Danbatta, was appointed in 2016 through a process that was viewed as fair. Danbatta, a leading academic, is also considered an industry expert.^{[32](#)}

The NCC’s close relationship with Isa Pantami, the minister of communications and digital economy, has undermined perceptions of the regulator’s independence.^{[33](#)} Pantami regularly issues orders to the NCC, potentially violating Nigerian law, and has forced the NCC to be involved in his feuds with other members of government.^{[34](#)} For instance, in November 2021, Pantami directed the NCC to develop grants to support higher education institutions’ research on emerging technologies.^{[35](#)} In December 2020, Pantami also issued directives to the NCC on awarding contracts,^{[36](#)} ordered the suspension of SIM cards,^{[37](#)} and asked the regulator to end some charges relating to National Identity Number (NIN) retrieval.^{[38](#)}

The NITDA, which was established in 2007, is tasked with planning, developing, and promoting the use of information technology in Nigeria. The agency also supervises the management of the country code top-level domain (.ng).^{[39](#)} Although the NITDA appears to operate independently, its director general, who is responsible for the day-to-day administration of the agency and the implementation of policy, is a political appointee who reports to his former boss, the current minister for communications and digital economy. ^{[40](#)}

B Limits on Content**B1 0-6 pts**

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, 3 / particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 6

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to the government's blocking of Twitter for seven months after the platform censored a tweet by President Buhari.

In recent years, the Nigerian government has blocked online content and social media platforms. Generally, the complex nature of Nigeria's internet infrastructure makes it difficult to carry out systematic filtering or censorship.

In June 2021, the Nigerian government ordered Twitter to be blocked on most major networks. Days earlier, the platform had deleted a post from President Buhari's account and suspended the account for 12 hours, stating that the post, which seemed to threaten violence against Biafran secessionists, violated Twitter's rules on abusive behavior.⁴¹ The government subsequently threatened to prosecute Nigerians accessing Twitter through circumvention tools and ordered media organizations to stop using the platform.⁴² Twitter became accessible again in January 2022. According to authorities, the ban was lifted after Twitter agreed to several conditions, including setting up an office in the country, appointing a designated country representative to interface with the Nigerian authorities, and paying taxes to the government; the company, however, has not acknowledged agreeing to these conditions.⁴³

During the previous coverage period, the Nigerian government blocked online content relating to the #EndSARS protests (see B8), including the Feminist Coalition's website, Radioislaq.com, and Endsars.com; they remained inaccessible as of July 2022.⁴⁴ The websites, which first became inaccessible in November 2020, belong to organizations that played prominent roles during the protests.⁴⁵

In January 2021, the news website Peoples Gazette was blocked on mobile internet services provided by Airtel, MTN, 9mobile, and Glo. Samuel Ogunidipe, the website's managing editor, alleged that the government ordered the block in retaliation for the outlet's October 2020 investigation into the professional competency of President Buhari's chief of staff.⁴⁶ As of July 2021, the Peoples Gazette was accessible at a different URL.⁴⁷

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international 3 / human rights standards? 4

The government does not regularly issue takedown requests, though there are concerns that online content relating to the #EndSARS protests may have been removed by content providers in October 2020 (see B8).

That month, a fund used by the Feminist Coalition, a civil society group, to distribute support to protesters was made inoperable for nine days on the online payment processing platform Flutterwave. The interruption was ostensibly due to “scheduled maintenance,” though the Feminist Coalition indicated that the closure of the account was related to their role in the #EndSARS protests.⁴⁸ and they later said it would be permanently closed. Media reports also indicated that the Flutterwave platform was temporarily suspended, which the company later disputed.⁴⁹ Separately, a YouTube feed from Arise News was taken down while livestreaming at Lekki Tollgate, a day after security forces shot and killed at least 12 peaceful protesters at the toll gate. The feed was reportedly flagged for copyright violations; it was restored a few hours after being removed.⁵⁰

According to Google's updated transparency report, there were no government requests for content removal between June 2021 and December 2021.⁵¹ Between July and December 2021, Facebook reportedly restricted 93 pieces of content “in response to private reports of defamation.”⁵² In the same period, Twitter received one legal demand to remove content, and complied with the demand.⁵³

In June 2022, the NITDA released a draft Code of Practice for Computer Service Platforms and Internet Intermediaries.⁵⁴ The draft Code mandates all internet intermediaries to act expeditiously and take down, remove, disable or block access to any content authorities deem “unlawful and prohibited” within 24 hours.⁵⁵ There is no clear definition for what constitutes “prohibited” content.

In August 2020, the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) published amendments to the Nigerian Broadcasting Code, which included regulations for online broadcasters for the first time.⁵⁶ The amendments imposed liability on online broadcasters for content posted on their platforms, though it did not clearly describe the scope of the online broadcasters covered under the rules. Sanctions for breaches of the code's provisions, including registration requirements, include orders for content deletion and website blocking. The amended code did not describe how sanctions will be enforced. Industry and civil society groups criticized the amended code for restricting innovation and online speech.⁵⁷ A bill to pass these amendments into law was under consideration, with a hearing held in June 2021.⁵⁸ The bill's sponsor halted his efforts to advance the law after the public hearing, and the bill has not advanced since.

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, 2 / or an independent appeals process? 4

Restrictions on internet content lack transparency. The blocking of 21 pro-Biafra websites in 2017 was not carried out through a transparent process. The block was ordered by the NCC based on Section 146 of the 2003 Nigeria Communications Act (NCA), which obligates ISPs to cooperate with the NCC to preserve national security and

prevent crime.⁵⁹ The government frequently relies on Section 146 to justify content restrictions. The blocking of websites associated with the #EndSARS protests in November 2020 also lacked transparency, as did content removals potentially linked to political pressure (see B2 and B3).

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 3 / 4

The persistent arrest of users for their online activities under the 2015 Cybercrime Act has resulted in growing self-censorship, particularly among professional journalists who publish content online (see C3). Self-censorship has worsened in recent years as the extent of the Nigerian security services’ surveillance and interception powers has been revealed (see C6 and C6).⁶⁰ However, some journalists persist in their work, despite potential repercussions (see B8, C3, and C7).

Nigeria’s LGBT+ community is marginalized, and online self-censorship is common among LGBT+ individuals.⁶¹ Many LGBT+ internet users report feeling unsafe using their real names online, preferring to engage anonymously.⁶² likely due to societal prejudice and measures like the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2014, which criminalizes public displays of same-sex relationships.⁶³

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 2 / 4

Political figures and government officials sometimes seek to manipulate the online environment on sensitive issues. Many media houses in Nigeria are owned or controlled by politicians and government officials,⁶⁴ potentially influencing their reporting.

Coordinated social media campaigns that spread disinformation on behalf of political candidates were common⁶⁵ at both the national⁶⁶ and local⁶⁷ levels during the February 2019 national elections. Campaigns hired individuals to create fake Twitter accounts that spread propaganda, bolstered certain candidates’ agendas, undermined opponents, and shaped the online conversation ahead of the elections.⁶⁸ According to a Quartz report published in February 2019, one campaign paid a team of 12 people to manage more than 600 Twitter accounts. A 2019 Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) West Africa study collected 34.5 million tweets from major politicians, political parties, media houses, and other accounts that published posts with election-related hashtags, and concluded that 19.5 percent of them showed signs of automation.⁶⁹ In May 2019, Facebook announced that it was deleting 265 accounts and pages run by the Archimedes Group, an Israeli company known for “conducting disinformation campaigns.” The group had used Facebook to influence the online environment in several countries, including in Nigeria ahead of the 2019 elections.⁷⁰

Apart from the manipulation of information during elections, political officials and their appointees often spread unverified information in an effort to whitewash their administration or policies.⁷¹ For example, the government denied the occurrence of shootings during the #EndSARS Protests, referred to as the #LekkiMassacre on social media, even though there were live streams of the incident.⁷² The Minister of Information and Culture described a report on the shootings as “a triumph of fake news and the intimidation of a silent majority by a vociferous lynch mob.”⁷³

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online? 3 / 3

There are no significant economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users’ ability to publish content online. The state does not limit the ability of online outlets to sell advertisements or attract investment, advertisers are generally free to do business with any online media outlet, and owners of online media outlets do not need informal connections with government officials to be economically viable.

ISPs in Nigeria are not known to manipulate network traffic or bandwidth availability, and generally respect the principles of net neutrality. There are no barriers to establishing online news outlets, blogs, or social media channels.

In June 2021, the NBC issued a statement directing social media platforms and online broadcasters to apply for a broadcast license.⁷⁴ As of July 2021, the major global social media platforms apparently had not registered with the NBC, while Nigerian social media companies that sought to register reported inaction by the regulator and an absence of a framework to carry out the government’s directive.⁷⁵ In January 2022, the NBC reportedly halted efforts to force social media platforms and online broadcasters to obtain broadcast licenses.⁷⁶

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 3 / 4

Nigeria is home to a diverse blogosphere, which has become a source of reliable news for many users and provides space for vibrant debate on a broad array of political and social issues. Diverse political viewpoints are represented on Nigerian websites and blogs, though some independent online media outlets faced backlash under previous governments.

There were robust and lively social media conversations during the 2019 election period, with both progovernment and opposition voices active across social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. The same is true for charged topics such as the #EndSARS protests or government handling of security of citizens; critics and supporters of the government continue to have robust media conversations.

Nigerians are typically able to access a range of local and international news sources that are independent and balanced and are broadcast in the main languages spoken in the country. Many of these local news sources are also available online. International news sources like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are also popular in Nigeria and offer online content in local languages,⁷⁷ including pidgin English.⁷⁸ However, some communities struggle to find online content in their local language. The majority of content is in English, while local languages are vastly underrepresented.

Online media outlets, social media pages, blogs, and websites feature a diversity of voices, providing content produced by ethnic minorities,⁷⁹ religious groups,⁸⁰ women,⁸¹ and LGBT+ people.⁸²

False information about the coronavirus proliferated on Nigerian social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Rumors about the government’s pandemic response and the health of political figures spread widely, sometimes by supporters of the opposition People’s Democratic Party (PDP) or the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC).⁸³ In March 2020, three people were hospitalized after overdosing on chloroquine, a malaria medication. False information that the drug could be used to treat COVID-19 has proliferated online, in part due to US president Donald Trump’s public endorsement of the medicine.⁸⁴

An April 2020 study by the CDD West Africa found an unprecedented level of online misinformation and disinformation, especially content that inflames ethnic and political tension. The study also found that false information originating online increasingly spread to Nigerian print, radio, and broadcast media.⁸⁵

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on 5 / political and social issues? 6

Online mobilization tools are generally freely available to users. As active social media users, Nigerians have become prolific digital campaigners, innovatively using social media and communications apps to call for social or political change. Still, after the government responded to the #EndSARS protests with disproportionate force, Nigerians’ online mobilization efforts have slightly reduced. The government’s blocking of Twitter (see B1) impacted social media users’ ability to mobilize online, since Twitter was widely used for organizing social campaigns.⁸⁶

Protests erupted across Nigeria in October 2020 after a video spread on social media of members of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), a police unit with a history of abusive behavior, shooting a man in Delta State.⁸⁷ Nigerians mobilized to call for the SARS unit to be disbanded, and the decentralized movement also took up calls for an end to police brutality and the unconditional release of arrested protesters.⁸⁸ The protests were largely organized on Twitter and Facebook, and protesters used social media to raise funds, mobilize volunteers, organize medical support, gather evidence to exonerate protestors accused of violence, and more.⁸⁹

The movement largely dispersed after the Nigerian military opened fire on protestors at the Lekki Toll Gate, a popular protest site, killing at least 12 people.⁹⁰ The Lekki Toll Gate massacre remains under investigation by the government.⁹¹

The government also imposed restrictions on people affiliated with the #EndSARS movement. Websites associated with protest organizers were blocked (see B1), while #EndSARS-related online content may have been removed by content providers in October 2020 (see B2). The Central Bank of Nigeria also froze the accounts of identified protesters and organizations that were supporting the protests.⁹²

The #RevolutionNow hashtag is often used in online discussion of poor governance and corruption, sometimes leading to protests offline. For instance, protests using the #RevolutionNow hashtag⁹³ were held on Nigeria’s 60th independence anniversary on October 1, 2020 in Lagos, Abuja, and other Nigerian cities.⁹⁴ Operatives of the State Security Service arrested and brutalized protesters in Osun State.⁹⁵

Digital campaigns mobilized prior to the #EndSARS protests have been successful, including digital activism that contributed to the defeat of the Frivolous Petitions Prohibition Bill, or the so-called social media bill, in 2016. Among its goals, the bill sought to constrain critical expression on social media.⁹⁶

After the reintroduction of the Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill in the Senate in November 2019, and ahead of a public hearing in March 2020, Nigerians mobilized online, using the hashtag #SayNoToSocialMediaBill, and offline to oppose the bill, which threatens to constrict the space for freedom of expression in the country.⁹⁷ More than 100,000 people signed an online petition in opposition to what has also been called the “social media bill.”⁹⁸ A similar hashtag, #SayNoToHateSpeechBill, has also been widely used.⁹⁹

Online activists played a significant role during the 2019 election period, mobilizing voters and spurring citizen action to hold elected officials accountable.¹⁰⁰

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 3 / 6

Nigeria’s 1999 constitution guarantees freedoms of expression and the press, but these rights are not always respected in practice, including for online activities.

Paradigm Initiative, a digital rights organization, led efforts to codify protections for internet freedom through the introduction of the draft Digital Rights and Freedom Bill in 2015. The bill’s objectives include protecting freedoms of expression, assembly, and association online, guaranteeing the application of human rights within the digital environment, providing sufficient safeguards against online abuse and providing opportunity for redress, and equipping the judiciary with the necessary legal framework to protect human rights online. As of March 2022, the bill has been referred to the Committee of the Whole in the National Assembly. President Buhari declined to sign a previous version in March 2019.^{[101](#)}

Though the Freedom of Information Act 2011 allows organizations to request access to public information, the government often does not respond to these requests. For instance, in March 2022, the National Identity Management Commission (NIMC) and the NCC both ignored requests from civil society organizations for information regarding the government’s decision to grant security agencies unfettered access to the commissions’ databases.^{[102](#)} There have been few cases where the judiciary grants access to information after the government denies the request.^{[103](#)}

Nigeria’s judiciary has achieved a degree of independence, but political interference and corruption, as well as a lack of funding, equipment, and training, hamper its ability to adjudicate cases. President Buhari’s January 2019 suspension of Nigeria’s chief justice,^{[104](#)} which occurred without the involvement of the National Judicial Council (NJC) or the National Assembly, as required by law,^{[105](#)} brought the judiciary’s independence further into question.

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 1 / 4

A number of laws assign criminal penalties or civil liability for legitimate online activities in Nigeria.

Before leaving office in 2015, former president Goodluck Jonathan signed the Cybercrime Act 2015 into law, which provides a framework for addressing cybercrime but contains broadly worded provisions that can be used to punish legitimate expression.^{[106](#)} Duplicating existing libel laws, Section 24 of the law penalizes “cyberstalking” and messages that are “false, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will, or needless anxiety to another” with up to three years in prison, a fine, or both. Section 26 penalizes distribution of “racist or xenophobic material to the public through a computer system or network” with up to five years in prison, a fine of up to 10 million naira (\$26,400), or both.^{[107](#)} Recent reporting has also revealed that Section 27, which criminalizes any person who “aids, abets, conspires, counsels, or procures another person(s) to commit any offence under [the Cybercrime] Act,”^{[108](#)} is being used to prosecute journalists.^{[109](#)} Several civil society organizations have filed lawsuits to challenge the constitutionality of the Cybercrime Act’s provisions.^{[110](#)}

The Protection from Internet Falsehood and Manipulations Bill 2019, if passed, would allow the government to disrupt internet access, block social media platforms, and institute fines of up to 300,000 naira (\$820) or imprisonment of up to three years for statements that are “prejudicial to national security” or “diminish public confidence” in the government.^{[111](#)} A public hearing on the bill was held in March 2020, during which civil society organizations and government agencies like the NCC and the Broadcasting Organization of Nigeria voiced opposition.^{[112](#)} After the public hearing, the bill was referred to the Senate Committee on Judiciary, Human Rights, and Legal Matters, but has not advanced as of the end of the coverage period.

The implementation of harsh interpretations of Sharia (Islamic law) in 12 northern states has increasingly affected internet freedom in those regions—notably in the form of blasphemy charges leveled against people for their online activities, often with long pretrial detentions (see C3).

Libel is a criminal offense in Nigeria, including online, with the burden of proof resting on the defendant. Print media journalists covering sensitive issues such as official corruption and communal violence are regularly subject to criminal prosecution.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards? 1 / 6

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because an activist was sentenced to 24 years in prison for a Facebook post in which he allegedly insulted the prophet Muhammad.

A number of bloggers, journalists, and private citizens were arrested for their online activities during the coverage period, including for criticism of government officials and for blasphemy charges in states under Sharia jurisdiction.

In December 2021, Fisayo Soyomobo, the editor in chief of the Foundation of Investigative Journalism news site, was arrested after he published a report on alleged corruption within the police force.^{[113](#)} He was released on bail the same day.

In November 2021, a Nigerian contributor for *The Epoch Times*, a US-based news outlet, was arrested and charged under Section 24 of the Cybercrimes Act after publishing an article on genocide against Christians in Kaduna State.^{[114](#)} He was detained for 8 hours and then released on bail.^{[115](#)}

In July 2021, Isma'il Isah was arrested in Sokoto State for a Facebook post in which he purportedly made blasphemous comments.^{[116](#)} Isah allegedly made derogatory comments against a government official he believed denied him the opportunity to secure an appointment in the local government. The status of his case is unknown as of July 2022.

In April 2022, humanist activist Mubarak Bala was sentenced to 24 years in prison on numerous charges, including blasphemy and contempt of religion. He was arrested in April 2020 for insulting the prophet Muhammad in a Facebook post. Though a judge ordered Bala released in December 2020, claiming that his arrest and continued detention violated his constitutional rights, Bala remained in pretrial detention from the time of his arrest.^{[117](#)}

In July 2021, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) court ordered the Nigerian government to pay Agba Jalingo, publisher of the online news outlet CrossRiverWatch, 30 million naira (\$72,900) for violating his rights during an August 2019 arrest.^{[118](#)} At the time, Jalingo was charged with disturbance of public peace, treason, cybercrimes, and terrorism for his reporting and social media posts on corruption that included allegations against the state governor.^{[119](#)} In March 2022, the director of public prosecution announced that the state had dismissed the charges against Jalingo.^{[120](#)}

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 2 / 4

While users can generally communicate anonymously online and can freely use encryption tools, there are some legal provisions that threaten anonymity.

SIM card registration requirements instituted in 2009 threaten users' rights to anonymous communication and privacy.^{[121](#)} particularly in the absence of a data protection law.^{[122](#)} In April 2022, the federal government directed all telecommunications companies to block SIM cards that had not been linked to a resident's National Identity Number (NIN), the key component of Nigeria's national biometric information system. Since the directive was issued, about 73 million SIMs cards have been blocked; individuals can only unblock their SIM cards by following steps to link their NIN.^{[123](#)} The Nigerian government first ordered citizens to link their SIM card registration with their NIN in December 2020, threatening to disconnect the lines of those who did not register within a two-week window.^{[124](#)} The announcement was widely criticized, particularly because NIN registration requires users to appear for an in-person capture of biometric data, exacerbating the risk of COVID-19 transmission.^{[125](#)} In January 2021, a civil society group sued the government over the directive, arguing that it violates Nigerians' right to privacy.^{[126](#)} The original December 30, 2020, deadline—which provided two weeks for all Nigerians to link their NIN with their SIM card—was repeatedly postponed.^{[127](#)}

The NITDA's 2019 Framework and Guidelines for Public Internet Access mandates that PIAPs “ensure every user goes through a registration process to acquire an access code for the purpose of public internet access after verification through the user's mobile number which is the unique login ID.” This measure eliminates anonymity for those who utilize free internet connections and increases the collection and processing of user data. However, the framework also mandates that PIAPs use the most recent encryption standards to protect users' data and communications.^{[128](#)}

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy? 3 / 6

National and regional authorities have long sought out technology to facilitate surveillance, and reports of improper surveillance against journalists persist.

In July 2021, the National Assembly approved a 4.87-billion-naira (\$11.85 million) budget for the National Intelligence Agency. According to the Premium Times, an online newspaper known for its investigative journalism, the government earmarked money for a WhatsApp Intercept Solution and for a Thuraya Interception Solution, communications systems that would monitor calls, texts, and data traffic.^{[129](#)} The Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP), a nonprofit organization, filed a lawsuit against the president in October 2021, and urged courts to find the government's plan to track and monitor WhatsApp messages and calls illegal.^{[130](#)}

In December 2020, an investigation by the Citizen Lab identified the Defence Intelligence Agency, Nigeria's primary military intelligence agency, as a likely customer of the surveillance company Circles. The company—which is affiliated with the private Israeli firm NSO Group, known for its Pegasus spyware—provides services that allow customers to monitor calls, texts, and cell phone geolocation by exploiting weaknesses in mobile telecommunications infrastructure.^{[131](#)} Previously, a June 2016 Premium Times investigation found that politicians in Bayelsa, Delta, and Rivers States had purchased spyware from Circles.^{[132](#)}

In October 2019, a Nigerian law enforcement agency disclosed that Nigerian security forces use software from Cellebrite and AccessDataGroup, two companies that provide technology to extract and forensically search data from electronic devices, including devices protected by strong encryption. Forensic search technology was reportedly used to search over 20 computers and phones seized from the *Daily Trust* when the paper's editors were arrested in January 2019 for their reporting on military operations in the northeast.¹³³ Earlier news reports revealed the presence of a command-and-control server located within Nigeria¹³⁴

The government's intent to enhance its surveillance capabilities is reflected in federal budget allocations. Tens of millions of dollars have been set aside since 2018 for various surveillance projects¹³⁵ that apparently fall under the purview of the Office of the National Security Adviser (ONSA) and Department of State Security (DSS). These include tools for social media monitoring, and drones and other mobile surveillance tools¹³⁶ apparently capable of intercepting mobile phone traffic and collecting the location data of mobile phone users.¹³⁷

In February 2020, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported on the use of cell phone data by Nigerian security forces to arrest investigative journalists (see C6). Police used phone records to identify journalists' contacts, detained those contacts, and then pressured those individuals to gain access to journalists and arrest them.¹³⁸

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies 3 / infringe on users' right to privacy? 6

There are numerous legal mechanisms that compel service providers to assist the government in its efforts to monitor users' communications. The Nigerian government has used those mechanisms to investigate and arrest journalists.

A partnership between location data analysis firm Unacast and MTN to analyze social distancing in Nigeria using aggregated and anonymized network data from MTN was announced in September 2020.¹³⁹

In February 2020, the CPJ reported at least three cases since 2017 where the government used call detail records to arrest journalists. In each case, security forces used records from service providers to identify trusted contacts of the journalist, detained the contact, and had them call the journalist to report to a police station.¹⁴⁰

Separately, data security issues were prevalent during the February 2019 presidential election. According to reports, a number of Nigerians received phone calls from individuals reportedly conducting political mobilization activities on behalf of the ruling party.¹⁴¹ The phone numbers and locations of the call recipients were reportedly obtained from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which collects citizens' data while conducting elections.

In June 2019, President Buhari signed the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Bill 2016 into law. Drafted to target international corruption, the law establishes procedures for cooperation with other countries in criminal cases through a mutual legal assistance treaty framework.¹⁴² The act includes provisions for complying with requests from third states for telecommunications interception, stored telecommunications, or other forms of stored electronic data, subject to oversight in some circumstances from the attorney general or the courts.¹⁴³

The 2015 Cybercrime Act requires service providers to retain user data and intercept electronic communications upon the request of law enforcement.¹⁴⁴ Under Section 38 of the law, providers are required to “keep all traffic data and subscriber information... for a period of two years” and comply with requests from law enforcement agencies to access this data.¹⁴⁵ The law implies a degree of judicial oversight for these requests, but the procedure involved is unclear.¹⁴⁶

The Guidelines for the Provision of Internet Service, published by the NCC in 2013, also require ISPs to cooperate with law enforcement and regulatory agencies in providing “any service-related information...including information regarding particular users and the content of their communications” during investigations of cybercrime or other illegal activity.¹⁴⁷ The guidelines do not include oversight mechanisms, creating the potential for abuse. The guidelines also stipulate that ISPs must retain user data and “the content of user messages or routing data” for at least 12 months.¹⁴⁸

Data localization is mandated under the Guidelines for Nigerian Content Development in Information and Communications Technology, issued by the NITDA in 2013. The guidelines require ICT companies to “host all subscriber and consumer data locally within the country.”¹⁴⁹ The stated aim of the guidelines was to boost local content and ICT development, but the requirement risks compromising user privacy and security, given the absence of adequate data protection laws.¹⁵⁰ The extent to which the guidelines have been enforced remained unclear as of 2020, as there have been no reports that international ICT companies have been compelled to comply.

A 2013 directive from the NCC requires cybercafés to “maintain an up-to-date database of subscribers and users, including their full names, physical addresses, passport photos, and telephone numbers.”¹⁵¹ Under Section 7 of the 2015 Cybercrime Act, cybercafés must make their registers “available to law enforcement personnel whenever needed,” with no clear requirement for judicial oversight.¹⁵²

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other 2 / actor in relation to their online activities? 5

Though there were fewer reported cases of intimidation and extralegal harassment against journalists and activists during the coverage period, online journalists and activists have been subjected to harassment and intimidation in recent years by local officials or powerful business people who have taken issue with critical commentary posted about them on social media. Along with the threat of arrest as an intimidation tactic, police often raid the homes of targeted bloggers, sometimes seizing equipment.^{[153](#)}

In April 2022, a female student was beaten and burned to death after her classmates accused her of making blasphemous statements in a WhatsApp voice note shared with them.^{[154](#)}

In October 2021, Nigerian journalist Eti-Inyene Godwin Akpan received two calls from the DSS after posting original pictures of injured protesters from the Lekki Massacre on social media and, during a live television interview, revealing that he had taken pictures at the site of the Lekki Massacre. The government denies that the Lekki Massacre occurred. Akpan fled the country after receiving the calls from DSS.^{[155](#)}

In February 2021, Benjamin Anah, a reporter with the Guild, a news site, was attacked by enforcement officers affiliated with the Lagos Environmental Sanitation Corps, an environmental agency. Anah was recording the officers in an altercation with another group; when he identified himself as a member of the press to the officers, they attacked him, then locked him in a vehicle and tortured him.^{[156](#)}

In October 2020, Onifade Emmanuel Pelumi, a journalist with online broadcaster Gboah TV, was found dead after he went to cover an attempted robbery of a government facility in Lagos State. Pelumi was seen being escorted by officers into a police van after police reportedly attacked a crowd of people at the facility; Pelumi's body reportedly had a gunshot wound.^{[157](#)}

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to 2 / widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? **3**

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to the lack of technical attacks against civil society organizations, media outlets, and journalists.

During the coverage period, there were no reported technical attacks targeting Nigerian civil society organizations, media websites, or journalists.

In January 2022, a hacker claimed to have broken into the server of the NIMC, which stores the personal and biometric data of over 60 million citizens. The hacker claims to have stolen over three million NINs.^{[158](#)}

In November 2021, the NCC notified the public that an Iranian hacking group had attempted to "infiltrate" ISPs and "orchestrated cyberespionage in the African telecoms space" and against "an unnamed African country's Ministry of Foreign Affairs." The attack was ultimately unsuccessful.^{[159](#)}

Government websites were breached during the #EndSARS protests, with hackers attributing the attacks to solidarity with the movement. The websites of the Central Bank of Nigeria, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, and the Lagos States Independent National Electoral Commission were reportedly hacked in October 2020.^{[160](#)} Hackers also breached a database belonging to the Nigeria Police Force and posted a file reportedly containing the personal information of hundreds of police officers. The hackers, all of whom claimed affiliation with the hacker group Anonymous, said they were in solidarity with the #EndSARS protesters (see B8).^{[161](#)}

During the previous coverage period, several cyberattacks against news sites and journalists were reported in Nigeria. Samuel Ogunipe, a Premium Times journalist, claimed that the security services hacked his email in March 2020. The Premium Times website itself was targeted with multiple cyberattacks in February and March 2020, and two distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks were reported in early March of that year. State security officials have denied any involvement.^{[162](#)} Similarly, NewsWireNG, an investigative news site, came under DDoS and malware attacks^{[163](#)} in March 2020, though the attacks were repelled.^{[164](#)}

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ecoi.net summary:

Report on digital media and
internet freedom (reporting period
June 2021 - May 2022)

Country:

Nigeria

Source:

[Freedom House](#)

Original link:

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/nigeria/freedom-net/2022>

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

18 October 2022

Document ID:

2081818

Austrian Red Cross
Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum
Research and Documentation (ACCORD)

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

