

**ENTRENCHING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION FOR DEMOCRATIC
SUSTAINABILITY IN NIGERIA IN THE
POST-TRUTH ERA**

By

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Abstract

Democracy requires mass participation that is why, it is referred to as participatory democracy. Participation can only be achieved through inclusivity which also can be attained through freedom of speech or freedom of expression. Freedom of expression is key and central to the success of democracy. It is the core of all other human freedoms, such as, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, freedom of opinion, etc because all these other freedoms are anchored on it. The study, anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Analysis, explored the necessity of freedom of expression to the success of democracy in Nigeria. Though, there could be some restrictions on freedom of expression, nevertheless, both government and non-government agencies should strive to promote freedom of expression for the success of the Nigeria's nascent democracy. The study recommended that pro-active measures should be made to entrench freedom of expression in Nigeria because it is the core of all human rights.

Keywords: Democracy, Freedom of expression, Democratic sustainability, Nascent democracy, Nigeria.

Introduction

Many local, national, regional and international treaties and declarations allude to the imperatives of certain fundamental human rights that are non-negotiable in sustaining the dignity of man. Most constitutions, especially in democratically organized societies, make provisions for some fundamental human rights in line with other regional and international declarations such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, The American Convention on Human Rights, The European Convention on Human Rights, etc. All these declarations underscore the imperative of the rights to be enjoyed by human beings across the globe. The rights empower them to function well in their respective environments and societies. The rights include, though not limited to; freedom of expression, freedom of association, the right to life and protection of life, freedom of the press, freedom of information, freedom of assembly, etc

Conceptual Clarification

i. Freedom of the Press – This refers to the right of the Press to gather, process and disseminate information, thoughts, views, opinions, ideas, etc without any restraints or censorship. According to Adaja and Talabi (2019: 18), Press Freedom refers to ‘the right of media workers (Journalists) to gather, process and publish information without prior restraint’. The right confers on the Press to publish truthful information without fear, harassment or intimidation. It is a right limited to a group of people, that is, media workers (Osinbajo and Fogam, 1991). Press Freedom is guaranteed under the First Amendment of the United States of America Constitution. However, in the case of Nigeria, freedom of the Press is partially covered by Section 39 (2) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which states that, ‘every person shall be entitled to own, establish and operate any medium for the dissemination of information, ideas and opinions (1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria). ‘Press freedom and free speech could be considered to be two sides of the same coin as they are both derivatives of the fundamental right to seek, receive and disseminate information without interference’ (Oriola, 2019:112).

ii. Freedom of Information – This refers to the right of every person to have access to official information. It is the right of any person, group, association or organisation to access information from government agencies, ministries, parastatals, private and public organisations that provide public services. The right ‘confers on every citizen, young or old, male or female, the right to actively seek

information considered to be in the interest of the public from government officials and agencies’ (Adaja and Talabi, 2019: 181). Freedom of Information as encapsulated in the Nigerian Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) 2011 provides detail explanation. It states that, ‘it is an Act to make public records and information more freely available, provide for public access to public records and information, protect public records and information to the extent consistent with the public interest and the protection of personal privacy, protect serving public officers from adverse consequences of disclosing . . . certain kinds of official information without authorization, and establish procedures for the achievement of those purposes and for related matters’. Thus, by the provisions of the FOIA, Nigerians have the right to institute proceedings in the court to compel any public official or institution to make records or information available and accessible. While comparing Freedom of the Press and Freedom of Information, Alabi (2007:66), states that, ‘Press Freedom is the right or freedom of the Press to publish without prior restraint, while Freedom of Information is the right of Journalists and other Nigerians to have unhindered access to public records and documents.

iii. Freedom of Expression – It refers to the fundamental right of every individual to express their views, opinions, ideas, etc. freely through their choice of media without any interference such as censorship, fear, threats, harassment, intimidation, prosecution, etc. According to Adaja and Talabi (2019:181), freedom of information ‘conferred on every citizen the right to receive and impart information’. According to the 1999 Federal Republic of Nigeria Constitution in Section 39 (i & ii), ‘every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression, including freedom to hold opinions, and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The theory which, according to Anaeto et al., (2008:70) was propounded by three scholars, namely, Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in 1974. However, the theory which its evolution was traced back to the 1940s was precipitated by scholars’ interests in investigating why people subscribe to different sources of information as well as the needs met the selected sources of information (media). It explores the motivation of audiences in selecting or using information sources that will serve them more appropriately and efficiently. The theory is anchored on the fact that audiences are actively involved in the process of information generation and dissemination, and selectively choose, attend to, process and retain messages on the basis of their needs. The emphasis is not on message generation and transmission, but on message

consumption. According to Folarin (2002:72), the question remains ‘who uses which content from which media under which conditions and for what reasons. Folarin (2002) further provided more clarification on the procedural components of Uses and Gratifications analysis by positing that, an individual has some needs related to communication (information) to be met, selects the source (medium) that can likely satisfy the needs, selectively consumes the content, and with the anticipated effect or impact.

Every political system depends on the quality and quantity of the information available at the public domain for the citizens to make informed decisions. Political actors actively seek, process and respond to information provided by the media system to entrench and perpetuate the dominant political ideology. According to Katz et al., (1974), individuals are usually driven by four needs in accepting and using information. First, the need for diversion from the daily routine and pressure. Second, the need to promote and enhance relationships. Third, the need to enhance personal identity. And lastly, the need for surveillance, that is, obtaining information about happenings around them. Thus, both political players and participants require information as inputs, and information as outputs for the political architecture to be nourished and sustained. Summarising the thrust of the theory, Anaeto et al., (2008:71) state that ‘the theory is concerned with what people do with the media instead of what the mass media do to the people’.

Freedom of Expression: A discourse

Freedom of Expression (FOE) is one of the fundamental human rights guaranteed by national, regional and international laws, conventions and treaties. Also, most nations’ constitutions provide for freedom of expression for their citizens. Freedom of Expression is core to all other human rights because it enhances human dignity, human development as well as individual fulfilment.

Nearly all international treaties recognised freedom of expression as one of the basic rights of man. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 guaranteed freedom of expression among nation states. According to Article 19 of the UDHR, ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’ (CLD, 2014:2).

Also, in line with the provision of UDHR, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was endorsed by 168 nations as at April 2014, clearly states that:

i. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of opinion

ii everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression, this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art or through any other media of his choice (CLD, 2014:3).

According to CLD (2014), freedom of expression is not limited to information or ideas that are favourable, 'but also to those which offend, shock or disturb the state or any other sector of the population' (p.3). According to CLD (2014), freedom of expression imposes both negative and positive obligations on the state. On the negative aspect, the right places an obligation on the state not to interfere with the exercise of the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas, except as permitted by law. And on the positive part, the right places obligation on the state to create an environment which supports a free flow of information and ideas in society.

According to Bychawska-Siniarska (2017:15), there are three components of freedom of expression. They are:

i freedom to hold opinions - This refers to the right of the individual citizen to hold opinions whether positive or negative. This right is regarded as 'almost' absolute because any restriction to the right is considered as inconsistent with the nature, structure and principles of a democratic society. Freedom to hold opinion encompasses what is regarded as 'negative freedom', that is freedom of not being compelled to communicate one's opinions

ii freedom to receive information and ideas - This involves the right to gather information and to seek information through all possible lawful sources. This obviously relates to the media, the right to inform the people, and the right of the people to be adequately informed, especially on matters of public interest.

iii freedom to impart information and ideas - According to Bychawska-Siniarska (2017:14), 'freedom to impart is complementary to freedom to receive information and ideas. Freedom to impart information and ideas is very critical to the political life and democratic structure of any given society. It allows for free criticism of the government, and it is only through this that meaningful free and fair election can be conducted.

Essential Elements of Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression, in contradistinction with other forms of freedom, consists of certain essential elements. According to the Centre for Law and Democracy (CLD) (2014:3-4), the following are the essential elements of freedom of expression:

i Freedom of expression is for all the citizens. It does not discriminate against anyone in terms of religion, race, gender, colour, language or origin.

ii Freedom of expression consists of the right to impart information and ideas of all kinds. It includes controversial issues, offensive speeches, etc. It is not only about favourable information, it includes those which offend, shock or disturb others, groups, or even state especially under democratic government.

iii It consists of the right of expression through any medium or media of choice e.g newspaper, broadcasting, the Internet, debates, verbal expression, academic research, etc.

iv It consists of the right to seek and receive information or ideas from others. This means that individuals should have access to a wide range of information sources held by public institutions and authorities.

v It imposes both positive and negative obligations on the state. Thus, the state is not expected to interfere with the right to seek, receive and impart except where it is permitted by law.

vi It is guaranteed regardless of frontiers. That is, the right to seek and receive information from abroad in whatever form-newspaper, broadcasting, speaking or the Internet.

Desirability of Freedom of Expression

The right of citizens to freedom of expression is guaranteed by most national, regional and international treaties and conventions. Its importance can never be over emphasized. Freedom of expression is desirable in every human society because of the following reasons.

i Freedom of expression is foundational and fundamental for democracy and good governance.

ii It enhances as well as facilitates good and deep debates of issues.

iii It encourages citizens to express concerns about government policies, programmes and legislations.

- iv It promotes quality governance because citizens make inputs.
- v It compels leaders to be honest and faithful because citizens have a voice or the right to ask questions.
- vi Where and when freedom of expression is not permitted, it makes democracy to be under perpetual threat, and
- vii Freedom of expression is one of the pre-conditions of functioning democracy.

Restrictions to Freedom of Expression

Unlike freedom of opinion, freedom of expression is not absolute because certain key public and private interests may justify the placing of restrictions on freedom of expression. Freedom of expression can become restricted in order to respect rights or reputation of others, and for the protection of national security, public order, public health or morals.

Article 19 (3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) identified four situations or circumstances on which restrictions on freedom of expression can be justified by the courts. They are:

- i There must be a pressing or substantial need for the restriction e.g. minor threat.
- ii Restrictions may be applied only to those purposes to which they were prescribed, and
must be directly related to the specific need on which they are predicated.
- iii The restriction must be necessary for the protection or promotion of the legitimate aim.
- iv The restriction must be proportionate, that is, weighing the likely effect on freedom of
expression against the benefits of the restriction in terms of the legitimate aim which
is sought to be protected.

Bychawska-Siniarska (2017), while citing paragraph 2 of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which was signed into law on November 4, 1950, states:

... the exercise of those freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interest of national security, territorial integrity or public safety for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation

or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the Judiciary (p 31). However, the European Convention on Human Rights prescribed three conditions for State interference on Freedom of Expression, namely:

i The interference or restriction must be prescribed by law.

ii It must be aimed at promoting one or more of the following interest or values - national security, territorial integrity, public safety, prevention of disorder or crime, protection of health, morals, reputation or rights of others; preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, and maintaining the authority and impartiality of the Judiciary.

iii and that, it is necessary in a democratic society.

Imperatives of Freedom of Expression in the Nigerian Nascent Democratic Experience

Freedom of Expression is not only important as a right, it occupies a central and critical position in the protection of other rights. It constitutes one of the most important and essential foundations of any democratically organised society. It is one of the basic requirements for constitution, growth and sustainability of democracy as well as individual's development and self fulfilment.

Section 39(1) of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic on Nigeria provides that:

Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference

For democracy to flourish in any society, according to Sobowale (2013:13), it must be founded on the 'principles of fundamental Human Rights which include association, worship, movement, right to life and right to protection of life and property from wanton attack and destruction, the freedom to hold and express opinions, no matter how incongruence with others' opinions or how unreasonable it may seem'. Buttressing the necessity of freedom of expression in sustaining democracy, Carpini (2004:414) submits that, 'modern representative democracies presume an information environment in which citizens are able to learn about pressing issues of the day, follow the actions of the elected and government officials, and communicate their views to these officials'

The Nigerian democratic experience is still relatively young when compared with the length of democratic experience of some other countries, especially western nations. The Nigeria's fourth republic which has remained uninterrupted till now, commenced on May 29, 1999. It is, of course, the longest democratic experience, without military intervention or incursion, since independence. Thus, democracy has subsisted, for the first time in the history of Nigeria since independence in 1960, for a period of about 24 years uninterrupted. It could be argued that, within the period of 24 years of democratic governance in Nigeria, it is absolutely unexpected that democratic culture would have been perfectly entrenched. It may not have been possible for all democratic institutions, organs, structures, units, etc, to have mastered democratic principles and culture within the short period of time when compared with western nations that have practised democracy for centuries. It is, however, imperative to state clearly that, the process of achieving it ought to have commenced.

Fundamentally, freedom of expression is the stronghold and pillar of democracy. Democracy hangs on the rule of law and respect for the views of others. According to Idowu (2000:23), democracy is about 'the majority having its way, while the minority is allowed to have its say'. The success of any democracy is premised on the freedom of the citizenry to seek information as well as express their opinions or views on any matter regardless of the dominant opinion. To achieve good governance; ideas and information must flow freely among the people and the government. It must be noted that 'the government (in a democratic setting) is elected as a trustee of the traditional values of the people' (Idowu, 2000:23). Democracy confers on all human beings the right to certain basic freedoms. According to Momoh (2000: 44) while citing Chapter 4 of the Nigerian 1999 Constitution, states that, the rights include 'the right to life, the right to dignity of human person, the right to personal liberty, the right to fair hearing, the right to private and family life, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, the right to freedom of expression and the Press, the right to peaceful assembly and association, the right to freedom of movement, the right to freedom from discrimination, the right to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria, and the right to compensation where your property is compulsorily acquired'. It must be stated that, there is a link between democracy and the observance or practicability of these rights and freedoms in any society. According to Momoh (2000:45), democracy is a 'form of government most suitable for ensuring the protection of the basic rights. No other form of government has proved more resilient and suitable for the protection of the rights. Democracy succeeded in

Europe, America and other nations of the world as a result of the ‘long years of struggle to include the people in the management of their affairs’ (Momoh, 2000:45).

Freedom of expression is germane to the individual upliftment and self-realisation. It is a condition for the individual to realise his or her potentials in some morally valuable ways. According to Bonotti and Seglow (2021:3), ‘we cannot understand the unique content of our own mind without free speech, those contents only come to fruition through speech’. The individual must enjoy freedom of speech to actively participate and contribute meaningfully in any debate and discourse. Restrictions on freedom of expression is inconsistent with democratic norms and principles. Many nations of the world, especially those that subscribe to the principles of fundamental human rights have it stated in their constitution’s certain basic human freedoms. Any undue restriction on any of these freedoms negates the principles of democratic governance ... restrictions on free speech usurp an individual’s own judgement in choosing what to express to others’ (Bonotti and Seglow, 2021:3).

Restrictions on freedom of expression may hinder mass participation in politics and governance. Democracy is a game of numbers. Representative democracy is hinged on mass participation. To achieve qualitative governance and quality representation in representative democracy, the process must guarantee inclusiveness and mass participation. Freedom of speech or expression is one of the requirements for citizens’ participation in politics. Freedom of expression or speech is required for the citizenry to generate alternative opinions or views. The beauty of democracy is to have alternative ideas or views on the table. Absence of alternative opinions will lead to indoctrination of the citizenry or despotism. The ruling elite will have it very convenient to force their views and positions on the citizenry when new or alternative views are forbidden as a result of lack of freedom of expression. This will impact negatively on the growth and sustainability of democracy.

Freedom of speech or expression makes sufficient information available to both the government and the governed. It raises issues for debate which will enhance democratic sustainability. According to Adaja and Talabi (2019:190), ‘democratic sustainability is anchored on quality participation of the citizenry induced by the quantity and quality of information available to them’.

Freedom of Expression in the Post-truth Era

It must be acknowledged that our society has transited from the information age to another age known as the post-truth era. The post-truth era refers to the period laden with fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. Post-truth era refers to the period of time in which people are more likely to accept arguments based on

emotions and beliefs rather than arguments based on facts. According to Ibrahim (2021:62), ‘fake news are stories that are false and deliberately constructed to misinform or deceive people. They are not based on verifiable facts but are produced and distributed as part of propaganda effort to distort reality for a specific purpose’. Fake news is synonymously used with other related concepts like misinformation and disinformation. Though, the three concepts are related they differ in meaning and usage. Fake news refers to false or misleading information intentionally and deliberately presented as facts. It may be done for profit or non-profit purposes. It includes articles, images or videos which are disguised as real news or facts. The element of intentionality is conspicuous in the case of fake news. Misinformation refers to information that contains false or misleading contents. However, the false content may not be intentional but due to the ignorance of the content creator. Disinformation refers to information that contains falsified facts intentionally inputted to take advantage or deceive people. According to Bateman and Jackson (2024:11), disinformation is defined as ‘information known by the speaker to be false, is a notoriously tricky concept that comes with numerous limitations, contradictions and risks.

Fake news makes ‘objective facts less influential in shaping public opinion’ (Ibrahim, 2021:61). In the contemporary time, fake news creates more confusion in human societies because it has increasingly become difficult or impossible for people to separate or distinguish fake news from truth. In 2016, the Oxford Dictionary adopted the word or expression ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year. And described it as ‘shorthand for circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’ (Ibrahim, 2021:63 citing D ‘Ancona, 2017).

Promoting and Preserving Freedom of Expression in Nigeria’s Nascent Democratic Experience

Restricting freedom of expression, in whatever guise or for whatever reason, will ultimately become counter-productive because it negates fundamental human rights as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as well as other international and regional treaties and declarations. It must be acknowledged that this is a free world, and as such, people must be free to generate ideas as well as freely impart such ideas for the benefit and development of mankind. The following are recommended for the entrenchment, promotion and preservation of freedom of expression in Nigeria:

Media sensitization campaigns: The mass media should spearhead the campaign to sensitize the citizenry on the need to demand and enjoy their fundamental basic rights of freedom of speech, of personal opinion, and of expression. It is the responsibility of the media institution to ensure that the citizenry is adequately informed of their rights and how to protect and preserve them.

Strengthening the Judiciary: The Courts are the last hope of the people to get redress when their fundamental human rights are breached. The Courts should be empowered to live above board, and to dispense justice without fear or favour. In a nascent democracy like Nigeria, there is the possibility that politicians as well as public office holders who may not have adequately internalised democratic principles, norms and culture may want to infringe on the rights of others. The Courts should be in position to fill that gap.

Strengthening political institutions: Political institutions must be well structured and empowered to checkmate the excesses of political office holders. Structures and systems must be well organised and coordinated to enhance functionality, rather than building structures around individuals.

Efficient infringement redress system: For the fundamental human rights to be protected and sustained, there should be in place an efficient and accessible system of redressing infringements of individual rights and freedoms. Aggrieved individuals should have unrestricted access to state organs established to handle cases of rights infringement, and at a cost affordable to the average Nigerian.

Human Rights Organisations' involvement: Organisations established to advance human rights should step up their activities and well positioned in educating and assisting citizens whose rights are infringed upon. Assistance should be provided to people, regardless of their colour, creed, religion or political inclinations, in getting redress when their rights are trampled upon by the high and mighty in the society.

Political education and sensitization: Political organisations and institutions should step up their activities in political education as well as sensitizing the citizenry to their rights and freedoms under the law. Information about how to get redress when rights are infringed upon should be made available to the citizenry.

Conclusion

Freedom of expression as one of the fundamental human rights guaranteed by both international and regional conventions and treatises as well as constitutions of the different nations is fundamental to the progress of the individual citizen as well as

the institutionalization of political ideology. Democracy can only thrive when it is anchored on consultation with the people, and consultation can only work if the people enjoy unrestricted access to information as well as freedom to seek, hold and disseminate information or ideas.

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