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SOCIAL MEDIA AND POWER RELATIONS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF REPORTS OF TWITTER'S BAN IN NIGERIA

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Introduction

he effects of power and ideology in the production of meanings which sometimes are hidden tend to form a critical aspect of social systems and structures (Wodak, 2002). The ubiquitous nature of social media has enhanced its use by all and sundry in different spheres of life and for different daily activities (Swart, Peters, & Broersma, 2019). In a multicultural society like Nigeria, citizens' participation in civic decisions has been greatly boosted by social media platforms. Scholars such as Kaplan & Haenlein (2010), also state that the new platforms people use for socializing and communicating such as social media can influence the way people think about the world, which in turn influences their decisions, behaviours, and the way they interact with others. For example, being exposed to a diverse range of social media platforms has been shown to increase empathy and improve social skills, while being isolated from social media has been shown to increase anxiety and decrease social skills (Fox & Moreland, 2015).

Nonetheless, citizen participation online can sometimes favour power hegemony, meaning that certain individuals or groups with more power and resources have a greater ability to influence the outcomes of online participation processes because not everyone has equal access to the internet or the necessary technological resources to participate fully in online platforms. This digital divide can disproportionately affect marginalized communities and individuals with lower socioeconomic status, limiting their ability to engage in online discussions and decision-making processes. Also, effective participation in online platforms often requires a certain level of digital skills and literacy. People who are more tech-savvy or have greater familiarity with online platforms may have an advantage in navigating and using these tools effectively, which can lead to unequal participation The Council of Europe in 2018 averred that most citizens that participate and engage in online discussions are consumers and not producers of contents. On the other hand, Omilana, (2021) argued that social media has offered young people in Nigeria platforms to connect and organise in ways that the government struggles to control and co-opt.

The Nigerian government on the 5th of June 2021, officially banned Twitter and restricted it from operating in the country. The ban occurred after Twitter deleted tweets made by Nigeria's president, and temporarily suspended his account. Twitter on the other hand claimed that the tweet by the president's account where he was warning Nigerians predominantly the people of the South about a potential repeat of the 1967 Biafran war due to the ongoing insurgency in the Southern part of the country was a breach of its policy. On January 13th, 2022, Nigeria lifted its ban after Twitter agreed to pay an "applicable tax" and establish a legal entity within the country sometime in the first quarter of 2022 (BBC, 2022).

However, the issue was argued to be far more complicated. Nigeria was alleged to have been toying with the idea of regulating the country's social media and internet. The antisocial media bill proposed in 2015 went as far as suggesting the death penalty for those found guilty of hate speech. The bill was withdrawn but was re-introduced again in 2019 in the Senate (Omilana, 2021).

Also, the Nigerian government claimed that although the deletion of the president's tweets was factored into the decision to ban the platform, the main reason was ultimately based on "a litany of problems with the platform as misinformation and fake news spread through it" which may have violent consequences, citing the persistent use of the platform for activities that are capable of undermining Nigeria's corporate existence (Informant247 News, 2021). Even the Minister of Information, Lai Mohammed made it clear during the announcement of the lift of the ban said that "Twitter must be licensed by the broadcasting commission and must agree not to allow its platform to be used by those who are promoting activities that are inimical to the corporate existence of Nigeria" (Maclean, 2021).

However, scholars and organizations including *Amnesty International*, the *British, Canadian*, and *Swedish* diplomatic missions to Nigeria, as well as the *United States* and the *European Union* in a joint statement criticized the executive order that it has set a dangerous, anti-democratic example on how a government could groundlessly ban and control the way its people use the internet, and by doing so even without clear and extensive justifications (Ohuocha,2021).

Also, some domestic organizations such as the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) and the Nigerian Bar Association indicated intent to challenge the ban in

court. The issue attracted national and international media's attention as journalists from political, business, and technological environments covered the report.

Furthermore, a literature review revealed that there are few academic articles and discourse analyses concerning the Twitter ban. This paper, therefore, takes a critical perspective regarding the issue of social justice in the matter and examines what power relations existed vis-à-vis dominant interests in the reportage of some selected news reports on the matter. Shiller (2005) suggests that news media actively shape public opinion and play a large role in the propagation of public perception through feedback mechanisms and attention cascades.

Therefore, the paper aims to discuss the attitude of news sources towards the Twitter ban in Nigeria. The specific objectives are:

- i. To examine how the selected news sources use textual and linguistic clues to report the underlying debates regarding the Twitter ban in Nigeria.
- ii. To interrogate the discursive and social practices that influenced the news sources' attitudes on Twitter's ban in Nigeria.

Based on the objectives, the following questions were postulated:

- i. How did the news sources use textual and linguistic strategies to report the underlying debates regarding the Twitter ban in Nigeria?
- ii. What are the discursive and social practices that influenced the news sources' attitudes on Twitter's ban in Nigeria?

Power Relations

Power relationships are those in which one person can influence the behaviour of another in a socially constructive way (Dowding, 2008), whether by coercing compliance or by using a less obtrusive or even more subtle method (Rahmasari & Nurhayati, 2020). Power relationships are those social objects in which the nature of the connection makes power functional; typically, this combines a certain amount of authority with the capacity to influence the other person in a desired way (Simanjuntak et al. 2022).

According to Legido-Quigley, Khan, Durrance-Bagale, and Hanefeld (2019), the distribution of wealth and resources is frequently used to define power relations, however, power relationships are not just restricted to these two areas, but also in psychological and social relationships, institutions, organisations, military and political institutions, and families, power relations are developed.

Aijazi et al. (2021), also assert that power relations are a core aspect of the construction of social relations. It is reflected in the channels of communication that are used, the people who are involved in those channels and the internet which encourages a "networked" world or which makes the networked individual socially consequential. Not only do networked individuals have unlimited access to information, but they are also increasingly influential in the creation of that information. Zetti, (2020) also adds that networked individuals have gained more control over the types of information and knowledge that they access and the ways that they access it. This power shift has led to the emergence of a new breed of social actors with the potential to shift the balance of power in society.

Social Media and Power Relations

Social media has had a significant impact on power relations in various spheres of society, including politics, activism, and business. Here are some ways in which social media has influenced power dynamics:

Democratization of Information: Social media platforms have enabled the widespread dissemination of information and news. Traditional gatekeepers, such as mainstream media outlets, no longer have exclusive control over the flow of information. This has allowed individuals and marginalized groups to share their perspectives and challenge dominant narratives, thereby decentralizing power.

Amplification of Voices: social media has given a platform to individuals and groups who were previously marginalized or ignored by mainstream institutions. Activists, grassroots organizations, and ordinary citizens can now reach a global audience, amplifying their voices and raising awareness about social issues. This increased visibility can challenge established power structures and facilitate social change.

Direct Communication Channels: social media allows for direct communication between individuals, regardless of their hierarchical positions. Previously inaccessible figures, such as politicians, celebrities, and CEOs, can now engage directly with the public, reducing the intermediaries that controlled access to power. This direct communication has the potential to foster transparency, accountability, and responsiveness.

Mobilization and Activism: social media has played a crucial role in organizing and mobilizing collective action. It has facilitated the rapid dissemination of information about protests, rallies, and social movements, allowing people to come together around shared causes and challenge established power structures. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook have been instrumental in organizing and coordinating social and political movements worldwide.

Influence on Political Processes: social media has become an influential platform for political discourse and engagement. Political candidates can use social media to directly communicate with voters, share their policy positions, and mobilize support. Social media platforms also facilitate the spread of political misinformation and manipulation, raising concerns about their influence on electoral processes and power dynamics.

Consumer Empowerment: social media has given consumers a voice and the ability to influence businesses and brands. Through platforms like Twitter, consumers can share their experiences, opinions, and feedback directly with companies, putting pressure on them to address concerns and improve their products or services. This power shift has forced businesses to become more responsive and customer-centric.

Algorithmic Influence: Social media platforms employ algorithms that determine the content users see. These algorithms can shape users' perspectives, reinforce existing beliefs, and contribute to filter bubbles and echo chambers. The power to control and manipulate algorithms lie in the hands of platform owners, raising concerns about their influence over public discourse and the potential for bias and manipulation.

Social media has provided opportunities for empowerment and challenge to power structures, it has also introduced new complexities and challenges. Issues such as online harassment, privacy concerns, and the spread of misinformation highlight the need for critical engagement with social media's impact on power relations (Leitch & Merlot, 2018; Lillqvist, Louhiala-Salminen, & Kankaanranta, 2016; Nasidi, Ahmad, & Dahiru, 2022).

According to Leitch & Merlot, (2018), social media has enabled a new type of power relations that were not possible in the past. They are now enablers of norms that individuals and societies find acceptable such as social, political, and religious systems. And they can create change in the behaviours of individuals and societies by influencing how people are treated, how they relate to others, how they act toward themselves, and how they interact with the world, including other people and society at large. Lotrea (2018), mentioned Twitter as one of the examples of the new power relations introduced by social technologies.

Furthermore, Miller & Vaccari (2020) asserts that social media has changed not just how people communicate, but it also can redistribute power, particularly between individuals and governments. Casero-Ripolles (2018) posits that today, with the growth of social networking, it is not just leaders that can affect change; rather, the most powerful agent of change today is the people, empowered by social media including those who own information, how it is distributed, and how it may be modified.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is indeed a growing interdisciplinary research movement that encompasses various theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of language. It emerged in the 1980s and has since gained prominence in fields such as linguistics, sociology, media studies, political science, and cultural studies. CDA aims to analyze how language is used to construct social power, shape ideologies, and reproduce social inequalities.CDA focuses on examining texts, whether they are written, spoken, or visual, to uncover the underlying power relations, social norms, and ideologies that are reflected and reproduced through language. It goes beyond the surface-level analysis of language and delves into the broader social, cultural, and political contexts in which texts are produced and interpreted.

This research is premised on Van Dijk's (2009) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Framework which asserts that CDA is a combination between theory and application of critical analysis. He defines CDA as a proposition that focuses on how abuse of power, dominance and inequality is practised in the discursiveness of social and political contexts, that is how mental representation of social group is influenced by the social structure. In this event, how the theme of conversation (Twitter banning and lifting of the ban in Nigeria) can influence how the selected news sources highlight the importance of the issue in their text.

Similarly, Williamson and Scifleet (2018) explain that Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) takes linguistic and psychosocial approaches one step further by analysing data from a categorically critical stance. Such analyses examine the discourse, the social 'story' at play in the investigation but also ask why that particular person is relating that particular tale. This study adopts Van Dijk's CDA because it hammers on perspective, position, or critical attitude in a multidisciplinary approach as it explains the secret ideology in social practice.

Van Dijk, (2009) also proposed triangulation of the linkage between discourse, cognition and society, emphasizing the cognitive phenomena associated with the structure of discourse and how social inequality, domination, and ideology occur. He believes that to find social actors' social representations, attitudes and ideologies, the relationship between the discourse structure and the structure of society must be seen. Yu (2019) opines that although dominant discourses are naturalized by ideologies, critical scrutiny of the discourses can help to make them transparent.

Adapting these assumptions, this study focuses on identifying and detecting media discourse on the Twitter ban and lifting of the ban in Nigeria, and how the media discourse tries to construct a picture of Twitter's future in Nigeria. In the empirical analysis, the emphasis is put on the use of textual and linguistic clues, discursive and social practices use to explain the news sources' attitudes on Twitter's ban and the lifting of the ban in Nigeria. To provide a critical view regarding these, the three-dimensional model of CDA, vias-a-viz text and linguistic, discursive practices, and social practices are employed.

Review of Studies on Critical Discuss Analysis and Power Relations

Critical Discuss Analysis research such as Higgins & Coffey, (2016), Fuoli, (2018) and Liu & Wu, (2015) generally focus on how companies construct themselves in the current economic and political environment to influence the wider stakeholders through corporate discourse analysis of sustainability reports, annual reports, or corporate websites. Media critical discourse analysis focuses on analyzing news discourses, more on the relations between social inequality, discourse, power, and dominance and quite recently some studies on social media studies begin to use CDA in analyzing power relations and social construction of ideology (Christopher 2008; Lillqvist, Louhiala-Salminen, & Kankaanranta, 2015; Zhu, 2020).

Christopher (2008) examines the contemporary configuration of power relations in the U.K. television sector, probing, in the process, the enduring accuracy of longstanding economic arguments concerning distributor dominance in the "cultural industries" more broadly. The study believes that such arguments are important to understand the power of the media and the circulation of power within the media. The study revealed that while recent developments concerning both producerdistributor and produceradvertiser relationships have begun to enhance the leverage enjoyed by the production community, the steady inflation of the mass-market premium enjoyed by the leading distributors (the terrestrial broadcasters) in the advertising market has largely sustained their power, about smaller (multichannel) distributors, to producer suppliers, and of course to the consuming public.

Lillqvist, Louhiala-Salminen and Kankaanranta (2015) did a critical discourse studies perspective to contribute to a nuanced understanding of discursive power relations between companies and consumers on social media by analysing the possibilities that corporate Facebook pages provide for consumer participation and criticism and corporate manipulation of discourse. The study draws from Bakhtin×s view of dialogue to shed light on contextual and discoursal features which operate to either promote or silence voices. The study revealed that the features of Facebook provide methods for "monologization" making the discourse appear participative while still controlling which voices are heard

Zhu (2020), looking at the linguistic perspectives, examined the issue of banning social media platforms. Zhu analysed six articles chosen from two international business newspapers which addressed the international media's attitude toward TikTok, and the US government's expectations. The study highlights that international media's stance toward the ownership of TikTok and its valuable algorithm varies, but TikTok users' benefits are not concerned with the discrimination of the Chinese public. Donald Trump's banning of TikTok was argued as a groundless national emergency.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative approach and employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a method to discuss selected news reports and attitudes to the Twitter ban and the lifting of the ban in Nigeria. This is because much of the public understanding of Twitter's potential security threat and the banning of Twitter in Nigeria comes through the media. The paper sources the media texts of five recognized local and international news sources, namely, *Guardian Nigeria, Punch, Washington Post, CNN,* and *Reuters for the analysis*. Five (5) stories (one each) from the news sources about the banning or lifting of the Twitter platform ban in Nigeria were purposely selected. Consideration was given to articles with the most reads with stories about the ban. The genre of the selected stories is mixed with both news materials and editorial opinions selected depending on how they appear in the stories.

Table 1: Selected stories

Newspaper	Title	Issuing Date	Uri
Guardian Nigeria	Nigeria lifts Twitter suspension after more than six-month clampdown	12 January 2022	https://editor.guardian.ng/news/nigeria-lifts- suspension-on-twitter/
Punch	Buhari orders conditional lifting of the Twitter ban	1st October 2021	https://punchng.com/breaking-buhari-orders- conditional-lifting-of-ban-on-twitter/
Washington Post	Nigeria suspends Twitter after the social media platform freezes president's account	June 4, 2021, at 2:42 p.m.	"Nigeria suspends Twitter after the social me dia platform freezes president's account". Washington Post. <u>ISSN</u> <u>0190-8286</u> . Retrieved 5 June 2021.
CNN	Nigeria bans Twitter after company deletes President Buhari's tweet	June 5, 2021	Https://edition.cnn.com/2021/06/04/africa/nig eria-suspends-twitter-operations-intl/index.html
Reuters	Twitter Removes Nigerian President's 'Abusive' civil war post	June 3, 2021	https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/twitter-re moves-nigerian-presidents-abusive-civil-war- post-2021-06-02/

The emphasis of the analysis is placed on three themes:

1. Text and linguistic organization: Fairclough (2002) defines text as an extended way for the semiotic dimension of social events. That the analysis of texts shows how texts articulate different discourses, genres and styles, potentially contributing to a changing character of social practices. Such text analysis allows the analyst to access the relationship, tension and shifts between the order of discourse and networking related to discursive and social practices. This study looks at the textual organization and linguistic structures of the news texts used in the analysis that is the words used, the structural organization of the sentence and even the sources of texts used to portray the ideological positions of the news stories.

- 2. Discursive practices look at how the selected news sources report the issue of Twitter banning and the lifting of the ban in Nigeria from the angle of the type of journalism used to report the story in terms of the content of the message and discourse procedures to enable the audience to understand the issue better.
- 3. Social practices majorly look at the socio-political background used in the stories to portray the ideological position of the news sources which can be inferred from instances and references used in the stories therefore 3 different stakeholders are identified; Twitter, the Nigerian government and the selected news sources.

Findings and Discussions

This study focuses on how selected news sources try to construct a picture of the Twitter ban in Nigeria. This section presents the data and discusses it using the three adopted practices as subheadings below:

Textual and Linguistic Organization

Firstly, the analysis presents the textual organization and linguistic structures of the news texts which reveal interesting insights into the ideological positions of the news reports. Both the local and international reports have been offered from some similar sociopolitical arguments, that the suspension was wrong and will have implications on political participation and freedom of expression.

According to reports by the selected international outlets, Twitter's statement described the suspension as "deeply concerning" and that "access to the free and #OpenInternet is an essential human right in modern society. "We will work to restore access for all those in Nigeria who rely on Twitter to communicate and connect with the world." This statement was mentioned in all the selected reports of the international news media, but entirely unreferenced in the selected reports of the local newspapers.

Also, both articles from the local news media have used materials from the Independence Day speech of the Nigerian president and other official statements released by the Ministry of Communication. One of the articles simply recycled the speech of the Independence Day speech. 7 out of the 10 paragraphs in the news text were verbatim quotations from the speech. The news sources report further state the justifications for the suspension as provided by the Nigeria minister of information, Lai Muhammad, something that almost all the articles securitized and disparaged using syntagmatic devices and reporting techniques. For instance, the *Washington Post*'s article called the justification for the suspension "vague" and described the suspension as "surprising". It also quoted an anonymous "senior official" of the Nigerian government source saying that "... he was shocked by the move and wasn't sure how it would work." Similarly, *CNN*'s article quoted a Nigerian Twitter user, who points to the irony of the suspension in its announcement: "... using Twitter to suspend Twitter? Are you not mad?"

Whereas the reports of the international news sources were more robust and followed almost the same pattern, nearly the same sources were used, and the organizations of the sources were in a similar sequence. Only the local newspapers have used a few official sources but were not as detailed and as forceful as the articles from the international media. All the international reports have used sources from civil society such as Amnesty International, SERAP, NBA and opposition parties. This indicates how the suspension was widely condemned both locally and internationally, and the growing demands at the time

that the ban should be immediately lifted.

The news sources also portray the removal of the Tweet of the president as nothing personal, one of the articles labelled the removal as "freezing the account" to indicate that the account suspension was temporary, and it stated that it was for 24 hours.

However, this study deducted a similar attitude in the deployments of certain linguistic and structural devices on the lifting of the ban particularly the subtle portrayal of suppression of Twitter. The article from the *Guardian* used the word "clampdown" right at the headline, which can be understood to be a strong word that could demonstrate abuse or suppression. The article stated that the suspension was lifted after a negotiated agreement by the Nigerian government with the representatives of Twitter. It went further to state the conditions for lifting the ban and these were all relayed from the statement issued by the government sources only.

However, the use of the word "agreed" reads like Twitter was pressed into accepting these conditions as singularly recommended by the Nigerian government.

The paragraph read: Apart from establishing offices in Nigeria, the Nigerian government said Twitter has also agreed to pay applicable tax in the country and "appoint a designated country representative to interface with Nigerian authorities."

This structural organization of the complex sentence puts Twitter in a passive and receptive position.

Discursive Practice

Discourse is socially situated, and it is a practice of how the texts are interpreted and received. To understand the selected news sources that report the Twitter banning and lifting of the ban issue in Nigeria, we must first study the purpose of journalism.

According to Richardson (2007), journalism aims to enable citizens to better understand their lives and their position in the world. To fulfil this informational need requires "reporting the actions and activities of the powerful". In this regard, the journalistic practice requires analysis to examine the form and content of the message, discourse procedures of production and consumption related to messages as producers of news discourse usually have a considerable effect on what is conveyed and the manner it is portrayed, thus, shaping social views.

The selected news sources have large consumers and are business oriented. In other words, to ensure subscription, consumers expect more than informational content, but personal views and professional opinions of the issue and the news sources are most attuned to that. In addition, the news sources are available online, therefore it is not difficult to explain why all the analyzed news articles have been observed to have discursively described the Twitter suspension in Nigeria as somewhat excessive and authoritarian.

Active journalism was employed by the news media to shape the audience's understanding of the issue and promote the democratic rights of Nigerian citizens. Both the local and international reports offered similar sociopolitical arguments, that the suspension

was wrong and will have implications on political participation and freedom of expression.

The news sources mentioned that social media, particularly Twitter, have become the main vehicle for Nigerian citizens to exercise their democratic rights and demand accountability from the government. Twitter was not contacted to substantiate whether the company had accepted these conditions or not and/or for further explanations. Thus, the aim of news sources journalism in this regard seems not about enabling citizens with information to better their lives but "reporting the actions and activities of the powerful" on Twitter's ban and lifting of the ban.

Social Practice

The Twitter ban reflected the authoritative nature of the Nigerian government to exert power over the citizens however, it tries to relate the issue with the long-proclaimed need for the sanity of online platforms by the Nigerian government. Nigeria's government have tried to introduce measures such as the social media bill among others due to the rise in fake news, hate speech and cyber security in the country. This the news sources accorded to the reasons behind the outburst of the banning of Twitter in the country. Characteristically, the news sources tried to demonstrate the Nigerian government as active and authoritative in its altercations with Twitter. This was grounded in a sentence-by-sentence reading of the reproduced Independence Day speech of the Nigerian president and the statements issued by other government officials in the selected news articles of the local newspapers. The same was further conditioned by the lexical patterns and word usage in the news texts.

The ideological position of the news sources can also be inferred from such instances where a reference has been made to the military background of the Nigerian president and the use of very strong concepts to qualify the suspension. Nearly all the news articles analyzed from both the local and international media have made direct reference to the military background of the

Nigerian president. In the *Punch* article, he was the "... Major General Muhammadu Buhari (retd.)". *Reuters* and *CNN* showed how he was a military head of state and mentioned his participation in the "brutal two-year Nigeria-Biafra war, which killed an estimated one to three million people, mostly from the Igbo tribe in the eastern part of the country."

The sociopolitical backgrounds in the reports further pointed to the separatist and secessionist agenda of an ethnic section of the country which was linked historically to the civil war. The role played by Nigeria's president was suggested. *Reuters* reported that "Buhari...served in the army against the secessionists and was Nigeria's military ruler in the 1980s..." The reports succeeded in creating a discursive circumstance for abuses and repression from the side of the Nigerian government. It was a clear case of media activism as the international media were either protecting the corporate interests of an American company or depending on the West-centric democratic ideals and values.

Twitter sources used in all the articles stated that the Nigerian president's tweet was removed on account of its violation of the company's "abusive policy". Sources from the Nigerian government, however, dismissed this accusation, saying that "Twitter may have its own rules, it's not the universal rule... If (any president) anywhere in the world feels very bad and concerned about a situation, he is free to express such views." It signified that

banning Twitter was the Nigerian president's way of showing his grievance in reaction to his suspension from the platform.

Furthermore, the news articles reproduced, from the official statements, how the Nigerian authorities had been active in and following due process to resolve the issue and in protecting Nigeria's national interests. This was indicated in the deployments of active verbs such as "Nigeria banned Twitter in June...", and "Nigerian officials defended the ban...". Whereas Twitter was constructed to appear passive in the news contexts such as "Twitter was used to promote fake news and for destabilising activities..." and "Buhari's government and Twitter have been in talks over a list of conditions for ending the suspension..." The Guardian initially used "Nigerian officials" or "Nigerian authorities", but toward the end of the report switched to using "Buhari's government". This could communicate the personal role of the president in the suspension.

CNN's article praised the use of VPN by some Nigerian users to bypass the suspension. It quoted one Adebola Williams, the co-founder of a consulting firm *StateCraft*, extolling how VPN became a "lifeline" for Twitter users in Nigeria. It further stated how it has always been on the agenda of Buhari's government"to regulate the use of social media in Nigeria."

Recommendations

Based on the findings, therefore, the following recommendations are provided:

- 1. Strengthening of media platforms to focus more on journalism oriented toward protecting political inclusion.
- Inclusion of diverse viewpoints in news reports on issues of multicultural societies like Nigeria rather than shielding misuse of power and all forms of politically motivated communication regulations.

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