

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HATE SPEECH: “FULANISATION” OF THE NIGERIAN INFORMATION SPACE BETWEEN 2015 AND 2023

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Abstract

The invention of different information dissemination technologies, along with the solutions they provided, created avenues for spreading polluting messages. From the oral tradition era to when Johan Gutenberg invented the Movable Types, and into the present, chauvinistic messages have persisted across human interactions. Social media spaces, which are one such innovations, inadvertently, exacerbated these phenomena. Individuals and communities are physically attacked and stigmatised because of hateful and disparaging contents published about their personhoods, cultures, and beliefs. Hate speeches, done along ethno-religious lines, and carried via the vehicle of politics, typified Nigeria's complexion of this problem during the democratic dispensations under former president Muhammadu Buhari, from 2015 to 2023. This paper examined the role of opinion merchants on social media platforms in shaping hate narratives within Nigeria's information space during that period, and how digital platforms facilitated the construction, circulation, and normalisation of the “Fulanisation” agenda. Based on Two-Step Flow Theory of the media, the paper thematically posited that Nigeria seemingly drifted, in a similar manner as failed states like Somalia, Sudan, and Afghanistan. Vile contents fuelled already frosty relationships between different Nigerian ethnic and religious communities while the government sat back to either take sides or do nothing. The use of social media by some Nigerians who paraded themselves as opinion leaders and

influencers, to propagate hate contents, pushed the nation to the brink. The paper recommended that digital and media literacy should be embedded in Nigeria's education system and public awareness campaigns to enable citizens identify disinformation and resist hate-driven narratives.

Keywords: *Hate narratives, chauvinism, Fulanisation, social media, Nigeria*

MÉDIAS SOCIAUX ET DISCOURS DE HAINE : LA « FULANISATION » DE L'ESPACE INFORMATIONNEL NIGÉRIEN ENTRE 2015 ET 2023

Résumé

L'invention de différentes technologies de diffusion de l'information, ainsi que les solutions qu'elles ont apportées, ont ouvert la voie à la propagation de messages pernicieux. De la tradition orale à l'invention des caractères mobiles par Johannes Gutenberg, et jusqu'à nos jours, les messages chauvins ont persisté dans les interactions humaines. Les réseaux sociaux, qui constituent l'une de ces innovations, ont involontairement exacerbé ces phénomènes. Des individus et des communautés sont victimes d'agressions physiques et de stigmatisation en raison de contenus haineux et dénigrants publiés à leur sujet, à propos de leur identité, de leur culture et de leurs croyances. Les discours de haine, à caractère ethno-religieux et instrumentalisés à des fins politiques, ont caractérisé la situation au Nigéria durant les périodes démocratiques de la présidence de Muhammadu Buhari, de 2015 à 2023. Cet article examine le rôle des influenceurs sur les réseaux sociaux dans la construction des discours de haine au sein de

l'espace informationnel nigérian durant cette période, et comment les plateformes numériques ont facilité l'élaboration, la diffusion et la normalisation du programme de « fulanisation ». S'appuyant sur la théorie du flux médiatique en deux étapes, cet article postule que le Nigéria a semblé dériver, à l'instar d'États faillis comme la Somalie, le Soudan et l'Afghanistan. Des contenus haineux ont exacerbé les tensions déjà vives entre les différentes communautés ethniques et religieuses nigérianes, tandis que le gouvernement restait passif, sans prendre parti ni agir. L'utilisation des réseaux sociaux par certains Nigériens se présentant comme des leaders d'opinion et des influenceurs pour propager des discours haineux a poussé le pays au bord du gouffre. L'article recommande d'intégrer l'éducation aux médias et au numérique dans le système éducatif nigérian et de mener des campagnes de sensibilisation afin de permettre aux citoyens d'identifier la désinformation et de résister aux discours de haine.

Mots-clés : *Discours de haine, chauvinisme, fulanisation, réseaux sociaux, Nigéria*

Introduction

Online communities have continued to evolve and consolidate their own influences in the 21st century. This phenomenon gave birth to new but naughty realities that appear to change and question how normative human societies understood and appropriated free speeches and hate narratives. More intriguing are the abilities to tell the dividing line between freedom of expression and hateful expressions, and to know when free speech transmutes to hate speech. Today, it seems anyone can cast aspersion on the highest authority in the land with only some easy strokes from an electronic device. In the process, huge volumes of fake contents circulate uncontrolled with the intent to strategically disinform and mislead multitudes. Gossips, slanderous, and defamatory contents are peddled without civility about people and institutions (Nadim & Fladmoe, 2016). These developments directly and indirectly brew anarchy, threaten security to life and property, and deepen segregation along racial, ethnic, and religious lines. Consequently, issues of hate speeches have dominated conversations across geographical, cultural, and intellectual boundaries as a global menace, side by side the advancement in digital communication.

It was within the aforementioned context

that this paper interrogated the normalisation of hate comments by agents of government in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023, while Muhammadu Buhari was president of the country. The paper employed a qualitative interpretative framework, relying on document analysis, historical synthesis, and moral reasoning, to examine the mainstreaming of hate narratives by members of his government. It explored the role of opinion merchants on social media platforms in shaping and amplifying hate speech within Nigeria's information space during the period, and how digital platforms facilitated the construction, circulation, and normalisation of the "Fulanisation" narrative in relation to national security, politics, and identity conflicts. The implications of these phenomena on national cohesion, democratic stability, and conflict-sensitive relationships in Nigeria were also evaluated.

Anti-Hate Speech Legislation: The Nigerian Hoax

Defining hate speech may be relative to who makes the definition and the perspective from which the definition is given. Practically, the various definitions offered often transcended bodies of laws and legal settings to include social, cultural, political, and economic contexts of the definitions. Hate speeches may be loosely said to be expressions or narratives which seek to attack a person or persons because of their race, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sex, gender orientation, disability, or gender identity. According to Article 19 (2015, p. 9), hate speech is "any expression imparting opinions or ideas – bringing an internal opinion or idea to an external audience". It can occur visually, in writing, verbally, nonverbally, or artistically. It can also be disseminated "through any media, including internet, print, radio, or television" (p. 9). A hateful expression also evidences intense and irrational emotion of enmity and detestation towards an individual or group.

Etymologically, the term "hate speech" was coined by a group of legal scholars in the late 1980s in the United States. A certain Mari Matsuda first used it in her seminal article in 1989 to highlight the way the United States legal system failed victims of harmful racist speeches by not providing them with adequate means of seeking redress (Brown, 2017). Because of the work of legal scholars like Matsuda, the term, "hate speech" was adopted by lawmakers, legal professionals, the media, and ordinary people for explicit use.

Hate speech connotes hatred expressed on an individual, an ethnic group, a racial group, a nation, or a marginalised group (Olufunke, 2020).

These narratives ride on the notion of free speech as a basic component of a democratic society (European Court of Human Rights, 2011). Such expressions offend, shock, or disturb the state or any section of a population or society. Hate speech is widely believed to be exacerbated by online communication (Salihu, 2017), such that they reinforce stereotype and prejudice across ethnicities, religions, and geographies. Literature attempted to establish the relationship between hate speech and mass media roles. For example, Alakali, Fage, and Mbursa (2016) identified that foul language, for the sake of it, is common on social media platforms. Their study reported that even though most social media users understood what hate speech entailed, they did not have an appreciation of their legal implications. Societal frustrations among the rich and the poor, leaders and led, etc., are also reported to be partly responsible for the escalation of hate speech. Olufunke (2020) expanded these causes to include outright impunity, status drunkenness, misplaced mass media roles, governance failure, illiteracy, and lack of enlightenment.

According to the sponsor of the infamous 'National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speeches Bill, 2019' at the Nigerian parliament, Senator Sabi Aliyu Abdullahi, the proposed law sought to eliminate hate speeches and discourage harassment on the grounds of ethnicity, religion, or race among others. It prescribed stiff penalties for offences such as ethnic hatred (Olokori & Aborisade, 2020). Recommended penalties included: a jail sentence of not less than five years or a fine of not less than NGN10 million or both. In extreme cases, the bill prescribed the death penalty by hanging, where any form of hate speech resulted in the death of another person (but this would be later dropped by the sponsors due to public pressure). These were to be implemented through the establishment of an independent national commission which would enforce anti-hate speeches laws across the country, ensure the elimination of the menace, and advise the Federal Government. However, since the earliest presentation of the draft bill at the Nigerian parliament, it apparently suffered setbacks for different reasons. The draft bill, along with myriad interpretations that greeted it, was silent on the negative roles of agents of state who provoke the sensibilities of the citizenry by issuing inflammatory statements, exhibiting crass impunity, and suppressing mainstream press from relaying reasonable feedbacks from the public. The reaction of the public peaked during the #EndSARS protest of October 2020, when Nigerian youths trooped out

in hordes to make demands on government to put an end to police brutality by banning the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) (The Cable, 2020; Ukpe, 2020). But in a strange twist to the realities that instigated the protest, functionaries of the state tagged the statements made by the protesting Nigerians as hate speech.

In 2018, a former Nigerian president, Olusegun Obasanjo, raised concerns in an open letter addressed to the then sitting president, Muhammadu Buhari. The letter, like others before it, generated reactions and controversies on sensitive issues affecting ordinary Nigerians and on the style of Buhari's government. In it, Obasanjo would allude that one of the sins of Buhari's administration was the "lack of national cohesion and poor management of internal political dynamics and inequality" (Obasanjo, 2018, para. 2), which typified the government's grandstanding while hate narratives reigned in the land. He would also accuse the Buhari's government of enthroning clannishness as a governance model through a "[c]ulture of condonation and turning blind eye" (para. 8) to cover up misdeeds of cronies and friends of his administration. Obasanjo also observed that the government's decisions under Buhari were guided by "nepotism bordering on clannishness and inability to bring discipline to bear on errant members of his (Buhari's) nepotism court" (para. 10). Newspaper reports and commentaries on these allegations christened them *Fulanisation* and *Islamisation* agenda of the Buhari's administration (Jannamike, 2019; Nwogu, 2019). In reaction, some government agents came at him with counter narratives aimed at invalidating all the issues that the letter raised and accusing him of seeking to divide the country in his old age (Gabriel, et al., 2019). A then member of the House of Representatives for example, Alhassan Ado Doguwa, strongly condemned everything the former president observed, including his person, saying that Obasanjo was morally unfit to make such criticisms (Aziken, et al., 2018). The culture of dismissive reactions and vilification of civic criticisms by agents of the state, appear to be normal in the average Nigerian psyche. Criticism of government's activities are equated to breaking some sacred unwritten laws of the land. Civil critics are considered enemies of the state, and their acts, a ploy to cause embarrassment to the government whenever its activities are brought under the radar of public debate.

Social Media Footprints and a Failing Society

History records how once very prosperous societies regressed to becoming failed societies due to poor management of communication in the public sphere by influential entities, and the exclusion culture. Ethnoreligious supremacy tussles, where one group perceives other people's values and ways as inferior to theirs, has become the colour of Nigeria's sociopolitical institutions and traditions (Aytogo, 2021; Fasan, 2020). Ethnoreligious centrality is not only promoted barefaced but celebrated with impunity even by those in the highest positions of political influence and authority. Jingoist ideologies take precedence over liberalist and cosmopolitan traditions within Nigeria's dynamically heterogeneous setting, and providing fertile grounds for tensions to escalate. Social influencers who champion such causes are openly venerated by how much they empower their kith and kin using the commonwealth's political, economic, and social capitals at their disposal. Utterances by elites, opinion merchants, and social influencers, are devoid of restraint at the risks of ripples that they could cause (Aziken & Agbo, 2018). Sometimes, such provocative statements emanate from people in highly respected public and private positions such as governors, members of the presidency, parliamentarians, leaders of sociocultural groups, religious clerics, and even highly placed personnel of security institutions (Ogundipe, 2018). Speeches by these opinion merchants attract intense reactions and emotions from their followers and traducers alike. For example, the Catholic Archbishop of the Sokoto Archdiocese, Bishop Hassan Kukah, in his 2020 Christmas Day sermon, accused President Buhari's administration of making nepotism a state policy, and institutionalising a northern hegemony by reducing other Nigerians in public life to second class status (Sahara Reporters, 2020). In a swift reaction, government agents accused him of inciting a coup against the government (Channels TV, 2020), while some religious bodies, like the Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), perceived the message as an assault on their faith (Daily Trust, 2021). This was followed by strong warnings and threats that made the clergyman's physical safety a cause for concern to many. The media carried reports of stern ultimatums issued to him by members of some religious sects to leave Sokoto if he wanted to stay alive.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was hinged on the Two-Step Theory of media, developed by Paul Lazarsfeld,

Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet in 1944. The theory posits that those informal sources of information, such as personal contacts, influence individuals' decisions on public issues rather than the mass media like radio, newspaper, and television. Information from informal sources are received from opinion leaders, whose influences resonate among their audiences (Hasan, 2016). A fundamental assertion of Two-Step Theory is that information from mass media travels in two distinct stages. The first stage is when opinion leaders receive messages from the mass media. The second stage is when opinion leaders pass their interpretations of the messages, along with the actual messages, on to their audiences. These opinion leaders wield personal influences on those who trust their interpretations of the messages. According to Hasan (2016, p. 163), "opinion leaders are quite influential in getting people to change their attitudes and behaviours and are quite similar to those they influence." The thesis of this theory supports our understanding of the influence opinion merchants, within the Nigerian information and political space, wield in influencing people's perceptions, decisions, and narratives of state-espoused conflicts in Nigeria. The social media create veritable platforms for these merchants to reach their heterogeneous sympathisers in geometric proportions. Because opinion merchants and social influencers understand the structured and ubiquitous natures of social media, their points of view leave significant imprints on the minds and choices of members of those populations who subscribe to them. President Buhari's agents projected the *fulanisation* and *northernisation* agendas in narratives that were somewhat forceful, with the aim to have them mainstreamed to the larger Nigerian society.

Hate Narratives on Social Media: The Nigerian Experience

Rhetorically, when individuals and groups exercise their rights to free speech, does it matter if those speeches are defamatory, insulting, derogatory, hate-inciting, or instigating violence against another person or groups? Does it matter if the expressions touch on the personhood, race, gender, religious, and other cultural peculiarities of the affected individual or groups? There are schools of thought that feel that there are no guarantees even in the legislations designed to prevent the disseminations of offensive narratives because they only address the symptoms and not the root causes of the prejudices that fuel hate speech on virtual platforms (Article 19, 2015). It appears that in

Nigeria, those who tag public outcries against acts of state sponsored and state protected impunity do not bother to find out if such expressions are actual responses to more corrosive information issued from high places or to activities of agents who enjoy the power and protection of the state (Awofeso, 2017). If not, rhetorically speaking again, does it even help government's role of promoting civic education and public enlightenment to perpetually retain the services of unpopular public functionaries, like the information minister under President Buhari, who was derogatorily tagged *Lying Mohammed* as against "Lai Mohammed" which is his real name (Daily Trust, 2017; Bakare, 2020)? Should Nigerians not also be wary of the notoriety of the managers of state information? To this end, every representation made on behalf of his principal, however factual and valid it was, was habitually viewed with cynicism by the public. The minister's guff on many fundamental national issues at different times and fora, begged for answers on if his bouts were results of ignorance or incompetency. Whichever it was, taxpayers' moneys and other scarce national resources funded such ineptitude, and elevated to the highest offices of responsibility in the country. Similarly, Nigerians were wary of the ineptitude of a regime of Service Chiefs under President Buhari, who had been long due for retirement, but were retained in office as rewards for their loyalties to the president while the nation suffered repeated embarrassing onslaughts in the hands of Boko Haram and other marauding elements (Aytogo, 2021; Fasan, 2020; Ukpong, 2020).

Domesticating anti-hate speech laws in Nigeria remains a contentious issue. The Nigerian state, along with its instruments of control on the one hand, is typically pitched against the larger Nigerian society, comprising civil society groups, leftists, academics, etc. on the other hand. This phenomenon, according to Brown (2017), is usually borne out of fear and mutual mistrust between the former and the latter. While the state, with its institutions and agencies, fear that too many rights granted to citizens could compromise their control over them, citizens fear that the few people in power would compromise their rights to narrow ends. Herz and Molnar (2014) said that such mutual insecurity and mistrust make the workings of anti-hate speech legislation counterproductive even if it is passed with good intentions in principle. In most developing societies, especially sub-Sahara Africa, there has been such shocking culture of profiling the ruled as "sub-citizens" while the political elite regard

themselves as "mainstream". In the case of Nigeria, especially under President Buhari, the level of insensitivity on the part of the leadership was heightened by the president's affront of disregarding the provisions of Federal Character in approving the implementation of government policies and appointments into government agencies and departments (Ukpong, 2020). Under such culture of impunity, asking the public to desist from criticising the president when they already had at their disposal alternative platforms that guaranteed anonymity and cover, reechoes the human rights abuse that that Decree 4 of 1984 entrenched when (the then General) Buhari led Nigeria as military head of state. Many believe that the Nigerian society overly bore the trappings of a failed state, evidences of which resonated in utterances of opinion merchants and social influencers over every available platform of mediated communication, especially the social media (Duruji, 2010; Awofeso, 2017). Some of these individuals lead massive groups like the Miyetti Allah Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria (MACBAN), the Oodua Peoples Congress (OPC), the Movement for the Actualisation of Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), the Indigenous Peoples of Biafra (IPOB), Arewa Consultative Forum (ACF), Jama'atu Nasril Islam (JNI), Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), Nigerian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs (NSCIA), Ohaneze Ndigbo, and even Boko Haram. They individually project chauvinistic narratives which seek to place them as the mainstreamers within Nigeria's dynamic social, cultural, and political spaces (Awofeso, 2017). In these all, human life loses its sanctity. Defenseless innocent Nigerians are not only slaughtered by bands of marauders, who ostensibly enjoyed state cover, but their deaths were suggestively caste in ways that equated them to those of livestock by political leaders who should have been more concerned (Aziken & Agbo, 2018; Busari & Adebayo, 2018; Ogundipe, 2018).

Discussion

The period between 2015 and 2023 represented a critical phase in the transformation of Nigeria's information and political ecosystems, characterised by the rapid expansion of social media, the intensification of political contestations, and the spread of hate speech embedded within ethno-religious contexts. The controversial "Fulanisation" of the government at the federal level, as reflected in appointments of persona from the Fulani ethnic stock, was central to the perception held about the government. The term "Fulanisation" was deployed in public and digital conversations to describe perceived political, territorial, and cultural

domination by Fulani elites in national affairs. This discussion situated the intersection of social media affordances, hate speech dynamics, and identity politics within Nigeria's evolving communication landscape.

Social media platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Nairaland significantly influenced the production and circulation of narratives in Nigeria by opinion merchants. Through participatory communication, social media enabled citizens to engage in political discourse and activism such as the #EndSARS and the #EndBadGovernance, which challenged elite narratives and postures. On the hand, this participatory communication reduced traditional gatekeeping, allowing unverified, emotive, and polarising content to flow freely. Within this context, social media became critical arenas where competing narratives about national identity, security, and governance were constructed and debated. Similarly, user-generated content increasingly replaced mainstream journalism as an evolving dominant force shaping public opinion.

Further, hate speech emerged as a defining feature of Nigeria's digital public sphere during the period, particularly during politically sensitive periods such as elections. During the 2019 and 2023 General Elections for example, hate speech was widespread on social media platforms and significantly influenced voter perceptions and political behaviour. These phenomena relied on rhetorical strategies such as stereotyping, scapegoating, and demonisation to reinforce ethnoreligious divisions. Further, during that period, cases of social media hate speech in Nigeria were not random constructions but strategic communications meant to reinforce ideological territoriality, where the notion of "us versus them" became deep-rooted. Metaphorical expressions and profiling, which were derogatory were frequently deployed to delegitimise opposing groups and mobilise in-group solidarity.

Conclusion

Conversations around the effects of social media-powdered hate narratives on Nigeria's stability may remain in the foreseeable future. Legislating against hate speech is, arguably, a direct yet, fundamental measure towards saving a regressing society. An anti-hate speech legislation is supported by this paper as a justiciable preventive rather than a punitive measure, to check the negative effects of social media disseminated hate speech in Nigeria. But such a legislation alone is not adequate to holistically address the possible

implosion of a failing state. Behavioural and social change strategies are equally necessary, if not more effective, as elements of soft power. They are aligned more to the preventive than to the curative.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the following:

1. Digital and media literacy should be embedded in Nigeria's education system and public awareness campaigns to equip citizens with the skills to identify disinformation and resist hate-driven narratives. This will foster responsible online engagement and reduce the influence of divisive content within the digital public sphere.
2. Nigeria should establish transparent and context-sensitive regulations in collaboration with social media companies to curb hate speech while protecting freedom of expression. Such frameworks must ensure platform accountability and inclusive participation from diverse stakeholders.

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