



Social media hate speech frames in Nigeria's 2019 presidential election campaigns

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Abstract

Social media have been a propelling channel utilized to bring about socio-economic and political transformations in the modern society. This, Nigerian politicians and their teeming followers know quite well, hence, the heavy use of the platforms to express their views and champion their manifestoes at election periods. With this development, there are indications that the wrong use of the social media poses serious threats to peaceful coexistence through the proliferation of hate comments. This paper examines hate speech frames in the 2019 presidential election campaigns. Survey methodology was implored with the aid of questionnaire to sample the view of members of the public. Findings reveal that the election campaigns were filled with hate speeches which was so evident in the media reports and the ever-free social media sites. The paper recommends that stakeholders must be alive to their responsibilities during election campaigns and desist from whipping up hate speeches during the campaigns. The ongoing hate speech bill in Nigeria should also be reconsidered in view of its enormous benefits to achieving a peaceful society while the controversial aspects of the bill should be expunged.

Keywords: hate speech, social media, Facebook, election, campaign, mass media

Introduction

Today, elections are the main legitimate ways of appointing some citizens to the positions of leadership in every democratic setting. More vigorous of the process is the presidential campaigns and elections as they determine who becomes the head of state and to whom the masses would entrust guardianship of their sovereignty. Thus, presidential campaigns across the globe come with a very strong interest from key players in the process (Adebumiti & Sambe, 2020).

During this process, the electoral stakeholders involve middlemen who are most times referred to as campaign directors or managers who manage the image of the campaign team. In addition to this, are political followers who are keenly interested in how their candidates will emerge victorious at the end of the day, and they often go to any length to ensure this is achievable. Most of these followers often engage in hate speech and spread of fake news in order to propagate the image of their candidates.

In Nigeria, this is also the scenario as most party supporters involve in name calling, hate speech and blackmailing to drive home their campaigns strategies. The social media is one of the media used by this set of people because it is a media that is not controlled or regulated. Facebook – a major social media platform has become a major platform for news consumption, with many users incidentally getting their news via the social media site (Reid 2017). It is no surprise that many news organizations have become very active on Facebook, promoting their stories there and chasing likes, shares, and comments. Most of the hate speeches that heralded the 2019 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria, were mostly championed via the social media and Facebook is not an exception (Tandoc & Maitra 2017). The believe that you can always churn out any information on the social media again underscores while many people believed that they can go away with hate speeches without recourse to the effect on the peace of the society, during and after the elections.

In the 2015 pre-election campaigns in Nigeria, some elder statesmen and religious leaders came up with the idea of a peace accord whereby the candidates of the two main political parties –

Dr Goodluck Jonathan of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Gen. Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) were made to sign a peace pact and even hug themselves on live television during the process. That did not put an end to hate speech as the rate at which the two candidates and their parties rained hate speeches and inciting comments on each other negated the so-called peace accord, thereby raising political tension among Nigerians. Since, hate speech has become part and parcel of Nigeria's electoral campaign processes, it is against this backdrop that the researchers came up with these specific objectives:

- i. to identify if hate speech was given prominence in the social media?
- ii. if hate speech has an effect on the electorate? and
- iii. how did they (electorate) manage the hate speeches they received during the 2019 presidential election campaign process.

Hate Speech on the Rise

The revolution of the social media has changed how people consume news. Today, Social media networking sites facilitate easy and quick diffusion of news as users can quickly share information and news articles to their cluster of friends. Facebook, for example, comes with a share function, and users can either share an article on their own page, or post it on a friend's page, or send it through private messaging either to a particular friend or to a group. Social media sites also allow users to post their own news, such as when they witness events first hand (Neumayer & Rossi 2018). These processes operate outside the control of traditional journalists, who once had a monopoly on news production and distribution. A consequence of these shifts, however, is the lack of gatekeeping.

The term "hate speech" is not new. The 2015 presidential elections in Nigeria highlighted this fact as President Goodluck Jonathan, an incumbent president faced a more popular candidate in General Muhammadu Buhari who has a cult-like followership in most parts of Northern Nigeria. Most of the media stations loyal to the former promoted and published hate speeches against the candidate of the opposition party, the APC. A documentary, the

“The Lion of Bourdillon” was aired on the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) which highlighted the bad sides of Mr Buhari and his chief sponsor and APC chieftain, Bola Tinubu. Below are some of the hate speeches highlighted in the 2015 campaigns which were reported in the newspapers:

- i. Jonathan has run out of ideas – Buhari (The Punch: Thursday, January 1, 2015)
- ii. Some senior citizens are motor park touts – Jonathan (The Punch: Thursday, January 8, 2015, p. 2)
- iii. We are going to war; every one of you should go and fortify himself - Mujahid Asari-Dokubo (Nigerian Tribune, February 6, 2015, p. 19)
- iv. Buhari can’t remember his phone number – Jonathan (The Punch: January 10, 2015, p. 6)
- v. ...voting Jonathan would doom Democracy (The Nation: February 15, 2015, Back Page).

The United Nations (UN), is also not taking the issue of hate speech with levity. In a 2019 document on strategy and plan of action on hate speech, the body frowned at the way “Public discourse is being twisted for political gain with incendiary rhetoric that stigmatizes and dehumanizes minorities, migrants, refugees, women ...” The UN further opined that hate speech does not mean limiting or prohibiting freedom of speech. It means keeping hate speech from escalating into something more dangerous, particularly incitement to discrimination, hostility and violence, which is prohibited under international law. Although, there is no international legal definition of hate speech, the UN described it as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor. This is often rooted in, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive.”

Recently, a Nigerian Senator proposed that the punishment of hate speech should carry death penalty. This has however generated heat debates, with many saying the bill is too inhumane.

Though, the senator defended the bill, he however soft pedaled that the bill would be represented to the senate after removing the death penalty aspect.

Inside the Nigerian hate speech bill titled “National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech Bill.”

The bill proposes that any person who uses, publishes, presents, produces, plays, provides, distributes and/or directs the performance of any material, written and or visual which is threatening, abusive or insulting or involves the use of threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviour commits an offence if such person intends thereby to stir up ethnic hatred, or having regard to all the circumstances, ethnic hatred is likely to be stirred up against any person or person from such an ethnic group in Nigeria.

According to the bill, any person who commits this offence shall be liable to life imprisonment and where the act causes any loss of life, the person shall be punished with death by hanging. Ethnic hatred means hatred against a group of persons from any ethnic group indigenous today Nigeria. On Ethnic Discrimination, the bill penalises a person who discriminates against another person if, on ethnic grounds, the person without any lawful justification treats another Nigerian citizen less favourably than he treats or would treat other person from his ethnic or another ethnic group and/or that on grounds of ethnicity.

i. Harassment on the basis of ethnicity

The bill says a person is guilty of ethnic harassment if he justifiably engages in a conduct which has the purpose or effect of violating that other person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment for the person subjected to the harassment. A person who subjects another to harassment on the basis of ethnicity commits an offence and shall be liable on conviction to an imprisonment for a term not less than ten years, or to a fine of not less than N10 million, or to both.

ii. Ethnic or racial contempt

The bill stipulates that any person who knowingly utters words to incite feelings of contempt, hatred, hostility, violence or

discrimination against any person, group or community on the basis of ethnicity or race, commits an offence. The offender shall be liable on conviction be liable to imprisonment for a term not less than five years, or to a fine of not less than N10 million, or to both. According to the bill, a corporate body known as the Independent National Commission for the Prohibition of Hate Speech will be established. The commission will be capable of suing and be sued.

Stakeholders comment about Nigeria's Proposed Hate Speech Bill

Recently, the National Orientation Agency (NOA), launched a strategic campaign tagged 'say no to hate speech' on social media platforms. As the Director- General of NOA observed, "in the last few months, our country and its people have witnessed a disturbing trend in social and political conversations that sometimes call to question our traditional friendship, love for neighbour and sense of unity. If you look at the social media, a channel mostly used by our youths, the voices of hate are what you hear. There is an urgent need for all men and women of goodwill in Nigeria to take measures to curb hate speeches and promote national cohesion, love and unity" (Vanguard, 2017).

Yet, the moves against hate speech by the federal government triggered fresh controversies among civil society and political organisations about what constitutes hate speech. While some political and public affairs commentators lament that such move is unconstitutional as it runs the risk of trampling on citizens' rights (particularly that of freedom of speech and expression), others succumb to the need for a law to regulate hate speech. A Lagos-based human rights lawyer, Ebun-Olu Adegboruwa, expressed in a statement to Premium Times, that "any law capable of hindering the freedom of expression granted under Section 39 of the 1999 constitution and the African Charter would be illegal and unconstitutional...This is just an attempt by the ruling APC government to gag citizens and if such law is ever passed, we shall challenge it to court" (Ezeamalu, 2017). Similarly, immediate past governor of Ekiti State, Ayodele Fayose, considered the move to classify hate speech an act of terrorism, as a plot by the APC-led government to silence the opposition party – PDP. In his words,

Fayose stated that, “this appears as another plot to silence the opposition and I make bold to say that, saying the truth concerning the country and its rulers cannot be termed as hate speech...” (Smith, 2017).

In a related statement, Rivers State Governor, Nyesom Wike, described the move as a threat merely aimed at instilling fear into members of the opposition, PDP. The statement reads: “...I don’t know what they refer to as hate speech. I don’t know whether we should all keep quiet when things are going wrong” (Gogo, 2017). A former aide to ex-president Goodluck Jonathan, Doyin Okupe, emphasises the need to protect those in government against what is said about them on social media, and to also prevent reckless statements that can incite or dehumanize people for no other reason except that they are in government offices. Okupe stated that: “...I agree that there is a justification for the law and that we need to look into the situation properly and a proper law should be enacted that can control what we say and how we say them especially on the social media. There is absolute need for sanity because what goes on in the social media is pathetic, it is unthinkable” (Bello, 2017).

Further, Governor Nasiru El-Rufai of Kaduna State observed that hate speech and fake news are the biggest threats to national security, and called for collective action to tackle them. According to him, “the social media had been used to incite people to violence... There is need to curtail the emerging trend of using social media to create crisis in the country. I think collectively we have to fight it and discourage those behind it by arresting and prosecuting them” (NAN, 2017).

Why Hate Speech Must Be Controlled

Nigeria is a multi-cultural nation due to its diverse ethnic, regional and religious identities. Political elites, ethnic and religious organisations have over the years exploited these identities, which later stirred up agitations for power and control of resources by the social groups that were once silenced (Danaan, 2017). The various forms of media have always been used to achieve developmental purposes in a diverse society like Nigeria, however it is increasingly

being deployed as a tool for confounding and fueling conflicts and championing retrogressive causes, especially during the campaigns for electoral positions. This would not foster the unity, peace and development that Nigeria needs at this moment. Violent conflicts, whether electoral, communal or ethno-religious, have always been the end product of hate speech being spread through the social media (Dauda et al., 2017; Santas, 2017).

According to a report by the Center for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), there is increase in hate speeches among Nigerians on various social media platforms. The report indicated that 60.3% of hate speeches recorded came from Facebook, 5.9% from newsletters and 4% from blogs surveyed within the period. It revealed further that 63% of perpetrators of hate speeches are prominent people while 39% of them are ordinary citizens (non-prominent). Additionally, 35.2% of the hate speeches surveyed, insult people for their religion, abuse people for their ethnic or linguistic affiliation, or express contempt against people because of their place of origin (Alkassim, 2017).

Again, findings of a study by Ende & Dzukogi (2012) indicate that verbal terror attacks directed at individuals, ethnic groups, religious institutions and regions, as stereotypes were used to describe those involved. Comments deemed as offensive employed hate speech, threats, abusive language and assassination of character. Indeed, the phenomenon of hate speech has taken an extensive dimension in Africa due to poor regulations of the media most especially the social media. Hatred between the ethnic groups that make up Nigeria has intensified as the use of hate speech continues unregulated (Ezeibe, 2015), particularly during elections.

Auwal (2018) posits that Nigerians have failed in their comments on national issues, to draw a line between hate speech and constructive criticism. Considering the porous nature of the country's fault lines of ethnicity and religion, the need to regulate the proliferation of hateful and inciting speeches through the social media therefore becomes inevitable. In view of that, the Nigerian government has taken steps to curb hate speech. Nigeria's Vice President, in August 2017, bewailed that "hate speech will no longer be tolerated, as the silence of the country's leaders on hate

speech would be a grave disservice to the nation, its peace and future. We have drawn a line against hate speech, it will not be tolerated, it will be taken as an act of terrorism and all of the consequences will follow” (Aytogo, 2017; Bello, 2017).

Theoretical Anchor

The theoretical anchor is agenda setting theory which explains that the mass media and social media is not an exception, through their tendentious presentation of events and other kinds of information selected for publication ascribed to such stories and information prominence that such stories become the talk of the town. The underlying effect is that the mass media forces attention to certain issues, they build-up public images of political figures, they constantly present objects suggesting that which all of us think about. In relating this theory to this study, one will find out that some of the media houses in Nigeria during the 2019 presidential election campaign employed this theory by continuously report hate comments by politicians which were aimed at dissuading the minds of the voters from exercising their franchise during the election. Most media houses whose financiers are politicians are found wanting in this regards. This has not help matters, but rather create an atmosphere of rivalry among the ever polarised ethnic groups in the country.

Methodology

The research design for this study is survey. Questionnaire was employed as the instrument for data collection. Fifty copies of questionnaire were randomly distributed to select members of the public, whose age bracket falls between 20 and 50, as at the time the 2019 presidential election was held in Nigeria. All the copies of questionnaire were returned, giving 100% returned rate.

Findings

The findings sampled for analysis are presented below:

Item		Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	The mass media are powerful political tool	50 (100%)	-	-
2	Which of the medium did you follow during the 2019 presidential election campaigns?			
3	Your medium in Item 2 was used for mobilizing voters during the campaigns	38 (76%)	5 (10%)	7 (14%)
4	You are familiar with hate speech content in the media	43 (86%)	2 (4%)	5 (10%)
5	Hate speech was reported in the media during the 2019 presidential election campaigns	33 (66%)	7 (14%)	10 (20%)
6	Which of the mass media was used to perpetuate hate speech			

7	Hate speech has an effect on the electorate	41 (82%)	5 (10%)	4 (8%)
8	How were you able to manage hate speeches promoted during the 2019 presidential election campaign process			

Discussion

Analysis above indicated that the 50 respondents representing 100% understand that the social media aggregate power to itself meaning that they are powerful tool used by politicians during and after elections. This believe is in tandem with the agenda setting theory of the media particularly during electoral process. The respondents listed the following medium as their guide during the 2019 presidential election campaigns:

- i. Facebook
- ii. Television
- iii. Radio
- iv. Newspaper
- v. Twitter
- vi. YouTube

With the information given above, the respondents were able to establish their political consciousness during the 2019 presidential election campaigns as they were glued to the social media for information on the process. This is in agreement with Amponsah's (2012) position that "the amount of space and tone of coverage of election activities by the media are important influences for any action a voter might take during the voting process. The respondents also affirm that the medium they followed during the

campaign period was used by the politicians to mobilise the electorate for the election. All the respondents understand what hate speech entails. Though there is no universal meaning for hate speech, “hate speech” will be understood as covering all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin (British Institute of Human Rights, 2012).

The findings also showed that 66% of the respondents agreed that hate speech formed the bulk of the contents churned out by the media during the 2019 presidential election campaigns. In a study by Adebumiti and Sambe (2020) on the reportage of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria, hate speech and inciting comments by politicians covered 40% of the coverage by the four newspapers in the study, an indication of the fierce rivalry between the two leading contestants in the election at the time. The reason for this may not be unconnected with the fact that the 2015 presidential election was a race between two people of different ethnic leanings while the 2019 presidential election threw up two candidates from the same ethnic group. The respondents however noted that the social media was mostly used in perpetuating hate speech. Majority of the respondents mentioned Facebook ahead of other social media like Twitter and YouTube. They mentioned the Newspapers ahead of other traditional media like the Television and Radio. This Ring (2013) affirmed when he noted that to the de-centralised nature of the social media platform, it has become a perfect place for amateurs and professionals alike to create and share ideas, information, images, videos, art, and music. Hence, it has become populated with sites that are dedicated to inciting hatred against particular ethnic, religious, racial or sexually-oriented groups. A quick glance through the comments section of a racially charged YouTube video for example, demonstrates how pervasive the problem is (Auwal, 2018).

The findings also revealed that respondents demonstrated that the use of hate speeches in campaigns among Nigerian

politicians, have grave effect on them as a stakeholder in the electoral process. While revealing how they were able to manage this effect, the respondents gave the following responses which were purposively summarised:

- i. I was able to manage hate speech comments by simply ignoring the threats in the message.
- ii. I managed it by fact-checking the comments and images on Google search engine.
- iii. I contacted some news editors to be sure the contents emanated from their medium.
- iv. What I do to such posts on Facebook or WhatsApp is to ignore and when I could not, I delete them.

Conclusion

While the Nigerian constitution is clear about freedom of expression or free speech, this liberty has in recent times, not been exercised with its corresponding responsibility. Even though it guarantees individual access to various points of views, discussions among Nigerians on both traditional and social media spaces are overwhelmed with tendencies that could promote extreme negative feelings and bring about hatred or incitement to violence against a group of individuals because of their ethnic, religious or regional orientations. The political class are not also helping matter because they involve in tremendous hate speeches during electoral campaigns without recourse to national interest. Findings from analysis above reveal that comments during the 2019 election campaigns were abusive of the ethnic, regional and religious affiliations of the diverse population of Nigeria. Whenever national economic, political and social issues are discussed, as they relate to, and affect the different groups in Nigeria (Ojo & Adebayo, 2013), the way and manner opinions are expressed via the social media usually wear the toga of incitement.

It is however, imperative to state that hate speech can step-up the tempo of irredentist claims in a pluralistic society like Nigeria. If the situation continues without proper attention by government and relevant stakeholders to find lasting remedy to

curb these ills among Nigerians, efforts to achieve peace and other developmental objectives may not see the light of the day.

Recommendations

In view of the overwhelming influence of the media and its contents on the society, this paper recommends as follows:

- i. On its part, the Nigerian government should focus on addressing issues of injustice, transparency and inclusiveness in all affairs. This would go a long way in resolving the increasing agitations by various groups, in addition to strengthening unity among the country's diverse population.
- ii. There is the need for high sense of responsibility and tolerance among politicians, because they have been the purveyors of hate speech even ahead of the masses during election campaigns.
- iii. The National Orientation Agency (NOA), Ministry of Information and Culture, and other non-governmental organisations in Nigeria, should up their ante by educating Nigerians on peaceful co-existence.
- iv. Owing to the imminent implications of hate speech and reckless comments on peaceful coexistence, moderation in the pattern of users' interaction on the cyberspace becomes inevitable. Even though the constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and expression, there is the need to draw a line between hate speech and constructive criticism, as this would provide the path towards containing the negative effects of hate speech on the Nigerian society.
- v. The ongoing hate speech bill in front of the National Assembly should be given support by everyone and the grey areas should be the only one that should be expunged.

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