

SOCIAL MEDIA HATE AND MISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN IN THE NIGERIA 2023 ELECTIONS.

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Abstract

Social Media platforms have become safe spaces for abuse and harmful content, making them potentially hostile environments for normal users. Hate not only denies those being abused the ability to freely express themselves online, it can lead to substantial direct offline harm and violence. Online lies, misinformation, and disinformation are being weaponized by movements and individuals such as politicians for their own political, social and economic ends. Meanwhile, the platforms they use to spread their lies fail to take action. Among the popular platforms are Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram and other social media outlets. According to the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH) there is a growing avalanche of hate on social media especially on Twitter. However, Sacha Altay, et al have observed that "The media landscape is no longer controlled by traditional gatekeepers, and misinformation, just like any other content, is easier to publish". (Sacha Altay, et al. 2023)

In Nigeria, the advent of social media for political discourse, has given rise to social media platforms becoming the new echo chambers of misinformation, hate, insults, name calling and character assassination by political opponents in an unprecedented manner. It has made it easier to spread hateful messages and propaganda to a wider audience often with devastating consequences. As noted by Monday Ashibogwu, the use of insults during elections in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon. It has been observed in all the previous elections. (Ashibogwu, M. 2023).

This study examines the use of social media for campaigns, specifically, the use of social media to spread hate and dangerous messages by political candidates contesting the Nigerian 2023 elections and their supporters. The study involves critical studies using qualitative methods and analysis. It looks at how hate speech and misinformation fuel violence in a fractured Nigeria society. There are fault lines and cleavages that have historically evolved in the Nigerian society. These fault lines have been built over time around ethno-religious differences. During elections often associated with the struggle for power these differences become overtly manifested among competing interest groups rendering the prospects for a peaceful orderly conduct of elections that is violence-free very difficult.

Keywords: *Misinformation, Disinformation, Hate speech, Fake News, Deep Fake, Fact Check, Social media.*

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the Nigerian Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) observed in its report on the prelude to the conduct of elections in Nigeria “Hate Speech and the Campaigns for The 2019 Elections: A Campaign Advisory” that the 2019 elections will be conducted against a background of a complex web of issues that have left the country divided along various cleavages. The report notes that “There are issues thrown up by the Farmers- Herdsmen conflict, which has found an outlet not only in hate speech but also in the spread of fake news and images as well as the invention of fake organizations. The tension spurred by the Biafran agitation of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) has generated toxic hate speech across both sides of the divide. The handling of the conflict between the members of Islamic Movement of Nigeria and the government of Nigeria has not only raised serious concerns about respect for human rights and respect for rule of law by the government but has also fueled a deluge of intra religious hate speech among the Muslim faithful. There is also the acrimony created by the perception of the prosecution of the corruption agenda of the government. There is so much bitterness across the country. All these issues have fed into a complex narrative which politicians from all sides seem prepared to deploy hate speech with the view to profiting politically by mobilizing sentiments around specific grievances unmindful of the consequences in which such hate-laden campaign have to the conduct of the election”.

It is noteworthy to observe that the conclusions reached about the 2019 elections are similar to that of the 2015 elections. Nigeria has concluded another election in 2023, in the four-year election cycle since democratic rule became entrenched in 1999. Based on the observations made of the previous elections, there have been some electoral reforms and guidelines in the election of 2023 put in place to guard against hate and dangerous speech.

Definition of Hate Speech:

Traditionally, the definition of hate speech had tended to include any form of expression deemed offensive to any racial, religious, ethnic or national group. In the 1980s, the definition was broadened to include gender, age, sexual preference, marital status, physical capacity and other categories. Human Rights Watch on the other hand defines hate speech as “any form of expression regarded as offensive to racial, ethnic, and religious groups and other discrete minorities and to women.” (Haupt, 2005)

At the Centre for Information Technology and Development (CITAD) the definition of Hate speech is seen as: -

- Insult of people for their religion,
- Abuses of people for their ethnic or linguistic affiliation.
- Contempt because of their place of origin
- Disparage or intimidation of women or girls because of their gender
- Discrimination against people living with disability
- Desecrate or abuse of symbols of cultural or religious practices
- Denigrate or ridicule traditional or cultural institutions of other people.
- Deliberate spread of falsehood or rumor that demeans, demonize, maligns, or otherwise ostracizes other people on the basis of religion, ethnicity, gender or place of origin for the accident of one form of disability or the other. (CITAD,2016)

The Susan Benesch schema in which five elements of hate speech are identified and also reviewed but it will appear that the schema is not as comprehensive as the 8 categories identified and utilized to analyze hate and dangerous speech. However, the Benesch schema is accommodated within the 8 categories of Hate and Dangerous Speech.

Hate speech directed at racial, ethnic or religious groups is a particularly pernicious form of speech manifestations which causes emotional as well as psychological distress and in extreme cases incites violence against members of the racial, ethnic or religious groups at which it is targeted.

From every indication, it will appear that incidences of hate speech have been around from the 1920s and early 1930s in the US where it was simply known as “race hate” and in Germany. By 1940s it was generally called group libel. Specific groups in each of these countries have been the target of discrimination, In the case of Germany after the Holocaust a heightened sensitivity prevailed when speech that has the potential to harm Jews as a group is discussed. In the case of the United States, the history of slavery and racial segregation led to non-white groups, especially blacks desiring protection against harmful speech. (Walker,1994)

Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is a fundamental element of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and is widely seen as underpinning democratic freedoms such as the right to form political parties, share political ideas, query the actions of public officials, and so on. Media outlets are crucial to the exercise of freedom of expression because they provide the public platform through which the right is effectively exercised. The idea of media as a platform for democratic debate embraces a variety of overlapping functions. Media, in this context, refers to all those channels that carry news and public information. (UNESCO,2008)

One of the arguments often used to allow the spread of hate and dangerous speech is the Right to Freedom of Expression. The Freedom to say what is in your mind, a free and unregulated medium of expression. The assumption that truth will prevail in the market place of ideas and looking at freedom from an absolute perspective.

Kaarle Nordenstreng in his Myths about Press Freedom Political Communication suggests that, “Freedom is one of the most pervasive elements of modern thought – both the popular consciousness and expert conceptualization of the human being, society and the world at large Nordenstreng in deconstructing, the concept of freedom says:

“it is a myth to take the concept of a free marketplace of ideas as part and parcel of original liberalism. The two other cases relate to landmark documents of the international community which are typically misused to uphold a biased western view of press freedom: UNESCO’s Constitution of 1945 and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Moreover, we highlight the Millennium Declaration of 2000. All these documents introduce an idea of media freedom which is quite nuanced and far from the absolutist notion conventionally advocated especially by commercial media proprietors – namely that freedom in this field means absence of State control, including legal regulation other than safeguards against censorship. International law does not support this notion of negative freedom; what is suggested instead is a notion of positive freedom whereby freedom is not an end product to be protected as such but a means to ensure other more general objectives such as peace and democracy. Consequently, it is a myth that the standard justification for press freedom based on the doctrine of free marketplace of ideas comes from the classics of liberalism. Milton and Mill do not provide direct support for contemporary neo-liberalism and cannot be taken as the basis for a libertarian theory of the press. The legacy of original liberalism represents rather social democracy and corresponds to a social responsibility theory of the press proposed by the Hutchins Commission in the USA in 1947.” (Nordenstreng,2007)

Freedom of Expression and Hate Speech

The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria provides in, Section 39 of the same Constitution under the Right to Freedom of Expression and the Press under subsection (1) states: Every person shall be entitled to freedom of expression including freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart ideas and information without interference.

The Constitution embodies a commitment to the principle that debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust and wide open. Whilst the philosophical ideal maybe that political discourse should be based only upon objective facts, noble ideas and temperate beliefs, in reality, rationality often gives way to “passionate and sometimes irrational and highly charged interchange”. (Haut, 2005)

Conceptual Overview of Misinformation and Disinformation

It is worthwhile to clarify the context in which we are using the term “Misinformation”. The handbook for journalism education and training produced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) suggests that Misinformation is generally used to refer to misleading information created or disseminated without manipulative or malicious intent. On the other hand, "Disinformation is generally used to refer to deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them. This is often combined with parallel and intersecting communications strategies and a suite of other tactics like hacking or compromising of persons.

According to Guy Berger, both are problems for society, but disinformation is particularly dangerous because it is frequently organized, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology." “(Guy Berger, 2018)

A related term that has gained currency in recent times is Fake News, thanks to its being popularized on Twitter by former U.S/ President Donald Trump who labelled almost anything he did not agree with as Fake News. But according to Jayson Harsin, who examined several major studies of fake news, suggest that it refers to 1) intent to deceive for political and/or economic ends (the latter, enter - tauntingly); 2) Reuters Digital News annual report for 2017 notes that “Definitions of ‘fake news’ are fraught with difficulty and respondents frequently mix up three categories: (1) news that is ‘invented’ to make money or discredit others; (2) news that has a basis in fact, but is ‘spun’ to suit a particular agenda; and (3) news that people don’t feel comfortable about or don’t agree with.” Cabanes, J., Anderson, C.W. & Ong, J.C. (2019) Meanwhile, the Oxford Institute for the Study of Computational Propaganda defines fake news as “misleading, deceptive or incorrect information, purporting to be real news about politics, economics or culture.”

In their view, Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti both concur that “Fake news’ is today so much more than a label for false and misleading information, disguised and disseminated as news. It has become an emotional, weaponized term used to undermine and discredit journalism. For this reason, the terms misinformation, disinformation and ‘information disorder’, as suggested by Wardle and Derakhshan (Wardle, C et al. 2018), are preferred, but not prescribed (Cherilyn and Posetti 2018).

In the history of misinformation, Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti, maintain that long before modern journalism established standards which define news as a genre based on particular rules of integrity, mobilizing and manipulating information was a feature of history. For instance, one of the early record dates back to ancient Rome, when Antony met Cleopatra and his political enemy Octavian launched a smear campaign against him with “short, sharp slogans written

upon coins in the style of archaic Tweets.” The perpetrator became the first Roman Emperor and “fake news had allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all”. (Cherilyn Ireton and Julie Posetti 2018 :15)

As Enrique Castejon-Lara of Universidad Central de Venezuela has noted, there is no a radical solution to stop the dissemination of lies through whichever means. This communication phenomenon is not new, nor did Goebbels begin it in Nazi Germany. It is something that has been present in human nature since the beginning of civilization and that is sometimes expressed by self-preservation and generally, by ideological, partisan or group interests. (Enrique Castejoon-Lara, 2021)

However, Silverman, et, al have attributed the weaponisation of information on an unprecedented scale in the 21st Century to the role played by powerful new technology which makes the manipulation and fabrication of content simple, and social networks dramatically amplify falsehoods peddled by states, populist politicians, and dishonest corporate entities, as they are shared by uncritical publics.

“The platforms have become fertile ground for computational propaganda, ‘trolling’ and ‘troll armies’; ‘sock-puppet’ networks’, and ‘spoofer’. Then, there is the arrival of profiteering ‘troll farms’ around elections.” (Silverman, C.et.al 2018)

One of the tactics deployed in the disinformation campaign is Deepfakes. According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, “The term deepfake is typically used to refer to a video that has been edited using an algorithm to replace the person in the original video with someone else (especially a public figure) in a way that makes the video look authentic.” Merriam-Webster Other forms of disinformation include the manipulation of Images from their original context (time, place, etc.), completely altering their intention.

“Social media has given rise to countless operators who assume false identities, infiltrating political networks and using them to influence public opinion. And while social media platforms say they are working to stop this malfeasance, they remain open to all manner of abuse by bad actors.” (Friedberg, B and Donovan J., 2019)

Therefore, disinformation, propaganda, hoaxes and satire are all part of the historical features of the communications ecology. (Posetti, J and Matthews, A 2018)

In order to spread a message far and wide, state and non-state actors around the globe deploy disinformation campaigns. These campaigns evolve to change their means and targets rapidly, making it difficult for any professional or member of the public to navigate and discern what is true and what is false.

The disproportionate increase in fake news due to the uncontrolled impulse that the social networking sites has given them has severely affected the entire society, regardless of cultural levels, ideologies or socioeconomic conditions. (Enrique August 2021)

Social Media and Misinformation

Across the world governments, agencies and NGOs have embraced and applied new media into projects and programs, and so have ordinary citizens and journalists. In fact, during the Arab Spring so effective was the use of the social media in spreading messages that led to the uprisings to an extent, that many have labelled the uprisings as Twitter and Facebook revolutions. Following the events in North Africa and the Middle East the Internet and especially the role and potential of mobile and social media has gained widespread media attention and resources and funds are increasingly being channeled into new policy frameworks, focusing on the emancipatory role of the Internet and new media. More and more development organizations are discovering the power of social media to affect change. Almost all major NGOs and development agencies now have social media policies and are active on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr and other platforms, which offer them an opportunity to engage their supporters and carry messages to larger audiences without the filter of conventional media.

However, utilizing social media also presents new communication challenges. Social media as has been found is a double-edge sword. Just as development agencies, private and Non-governmental organizations have discovered the power of the social media as a fast and effective useful tool in spreading development messages, it has also been found to be the most potent means of spreading misinformation, fake news, hate messages, lies and dis information.

Nowadays, social media have reached all sectors of society, and they have provoked a real information revolution. Almost everybody is involved in the new information process generated by them. However, that new communicational phenomenon has started to perturb the traditional news reporting, generating a confusion situation because of mixing true facts, fake news and gossips. People, in this case, are affected by an over exposition to a pretty contaminated news environment.

According to Statistics.com The use of social media worldwide over passed the 2.5 billion of persons, and that the platform more used was Facebook. This specialized Web site says, “In 2018, an estimated 2.65 billion people were using social

media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 3.1 billion in 2021. Social network penetration is constantly increasing worldwide and as of January 2019 stood at 45 percent.” (Statistics.com 2020)

In Nigeria, there are 154,301,195 Internet Users while Internet penetration is 73.0%. Facebook alone has 31,860,000 subscribers (Internet Users 2022)

Now, with more than 400 million subscribers, its market is larger than North America's. Africa took the lead in the global shift from fixed to mobile telephones, notes a report by the UN International Telecommunications Union. * Rarely has anyone adopted mobile phones faster and with greater innovation (see *A bank in every African pocket?, Better health at the click of a button*).

A similar story now seems again to be unfolding. Africans are coupling their already extensive use of cell phones with a more recent and massive interest in social media — Internet-based tools and platforms that allow people to interact with each other much more than in the past. In the process, Africans are leading what may be the next global trend: a major shift to mobile Internet use, with social media as its main drivers. According to Mary Meeker, an influential Internet analyst, mobile Internet and social media are the fastest-growing areas of the technology industry worldwide, and she predicts that mobile Internet use will soon overtake fixed Internet use.

Studies suggest that when Africans go online (predominantly with their mobile phones) they spend much of their time on social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on). Sending and reading e-mails, reading news and posting research queries have become less important activities for Africans.

According to the UN, Africa's burgeoning youth population, holds the key to transforming the region's digital future especially, in a digital economy and leapfrogging technologies. However, this can take place only with the right policies in place says UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

This calls for more connectivity; and less digital fragmentation. More bridges across digital divides; and fewer barriers. Greater autonomy for ordinary people; less abuse and disinformation, he declared. (Thalif Deen Reprint 2022)

Digital Distribution of Hate and Misinformation Messages.

With low distribution costs, one of the characteristics of digital media is messages are sent at little or no costs. Although Internet users must still pay for connectivity, the ability to distribute content over the Internet is instantaneous. A click of the mouse can send content to tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of people at nearly the speed of light. Hate messages and misinformation messages can reach a wide audience in an extremely short period of time and much faster than what it takes to create a physical product to send. (Pavlik & McIntosh 2011:239) The fact that once a piece of digital message is made available on the Internet there is no way to completely control how it is distributed and this is a cause for serious concern, especially in the case of the spread of hate and misinformation messages.

In recent months Facebook — the major social media platform worldwide and currently the most visited website in most of Africa — has seen massive growth on the continent. The number of African Facebook users now stands at over 17 million, up from 10 million in 2009. More than 15 per cent of people online in Africa are currently using the platform, compared to 11 per cent in Asia. Two other social networking websites, Twitter and YouTube, rank among the most visited websites in most African countries.

Additionally, the use of social media continues growing, including in a cross-platform communication form. For that reason, the new information environment on the Web is very complex. Users of Facebook also are simultaneously engaged with other social networks like Twitter and Instagram, for instance, and they inter-connect all of them to reach a more dynamic and comprehensive message emission. However, the network of transfer of information is very complex. Offline and online structures are interlinked, reinforcing and building on each other in ways that are important to understand. As a result, in many respects WhatsApp amplifies the significance and influence of networks that already exist. It is therefore important to understand that there are predominantly large Facebook and WhatsApp groups in Nigeria. These groups often reflect strong and extensive offline social networks such as religious groups, work groups, alumni associations and family circles. The average size of the groups may consist of 50 or more people and hate misinformation are shared among the WhatsApp groups through forwarding of messages. It is possible to reach about 1000 individuals at a single instance by merely clicking a button. Since WhatsApp is encrypted it is difficult to counter misinformation messages shared on this platform.

Yet, some information is transferred from the traditional media (an Offline) as rumor, for example it could be from a newspaper, a local radio or tv. station and it gets picked up by the social media either Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or WhatsApp and between the social media too, it is shared and given the viral effect.

Messages also move between social media platforms, with WhatsApp messages posted to Twitter and Facebook. Many influencers believe that it is when individuals see messages on a variety of platforms that they start to believe them.

Content shared on WhatsApp, be it false or accurate, can shape offline views by "shaping people's conversations with friends" and by becoming discussion points of radio talk shows. (Hitchen, Jamie, et al 2019)

Fact checking as Safeguard against Misinformation and Fake News

Social Media journalism sometimes defined as Citizen Journalism defies the traditional concept of Gatekeeping. There are no editors or gatekeepers to determine whether what is being sent out is factual.

Gatekeeping has evolved as a concept of journalistic culture, defined as 'a particular set of ideas and practices by which journalists legitimate their role in society and render their work meaningful' (Hanitzsch, 2007: 369). In other words, journalistic cultures include all levels of journalistic gatekeeping that is 'the process through which events are covered by the mass media, considering concepts on five levels of analysis' (Shoemaker and Vos, 2009: 3). Journalistic culture is expressed at the individual level of gatekeeping in that journalists' behaviors are guided by cultural norms and roles. On the routine and organizational level of gatekeeping, journalistic culture is shaped by the way journalists interact with sources, do research, find news stories, and relate those to their audiences. On the social institutional level and the social system level, journalistic culture is shaped by the economic, political, and legal system in which journalists operate. Since there are no gatekeepers in the social media, how then do we act as gatekeepers in the world of social media where anything goes. (Hellmueller, 2017)

We as individuals will have to act as our own gatekeepers. We have to decide what to take and what not to take. We can Fact check the information we come across whether it is factually correct or not. There are now Fact checking sites which could be used to verify messages sent online. According to Lucas Graves and Michelle A. Amazeen, internal fact checking first emerged as a distinct role in U.S. newsmagazines in the 1920s and 1930s.

However, with the advent of cyber journalism, external –fact checking which consists of publishing an evidence- based analysis of the accuracy of a political claim, news report, or other public text have been established by scores of organizations in many countries. In the U.S. the early sites appeared in the 2000s. These sites may be based in universities, and other areas of civil society. External fact checking interventions help in countering misinformation and promoting accurate beliefs. (Graves and Amazeen, 2019)

In Nigeria, for instance, the tool alerted WHO about Bishop David Oyedepo's warning to his followers to avoid the COVID-19 vaccine, claiming it was deadly.

"We alerted our partner Dubawa, Nigeria's first indigenous independent verification and fact-checking project, to this rumor so they could debunk it". (<https://dubawa.org/>)

Another counter misinformation social content hub is Viral Facts Africa, it produces and disseminates content that counters health misinformation and closes information gaps, and works in close collaboration with a network of public health institutions and fact checkers. (<https://who-africa-newsrom.com/press/viral-facts-africa-initiative-to-combat-dangerous-health-misinformation/>) – The Nigeria Center for Democracy and Development (CDD) in collaboration with Media Trust Limited have developed a Fact Check site to counter the spread of misinformation and Fake News. This has been found to be a good source for identifying false claims made on WhatsApp and other social media platforms.

Addressing misinformation that has proliferated in the public sphere could be difficult because it requires the source of information be trusted. For instance, who is providing the information and is the source credible? (Krause NM, et al..2020) The deluge of information has most often led to confusion on the part of the public on what to trust and what not to trust. Besides, one cannot assume that "fact checkers" are trusted by the public to be objective, or that objective presentation of data will simply overturn misinformation, especially when it is value-laden (Krause NM, et al 2020). Moreover, just as misinformation tends to proliferate within a social circle where few individuals interact with content "debunking" misinformation, scientific information tends to be shared within its own echo chamber. Thus, it is argued it may rarely be interacted with by those who do not already agree with the content (Zollo F, et al. 2017) So even if a scientific source of information is trusted, and "gets out ahead" of misinformation, there is a risk it will never reach its intended audience.

Different types of content shared online have varying impacts depending on who shared them and how they are presented to the user. The format of the messages also matters. For instance, pictures are more powerful than text. Visuals have more impact. Networks. Offline and online structures are interlinked, reinforcing and building on each other in ways that are important to understand. As a result, in many respects WhatsApp amplifies the significance and influence of networks that already exist within the Nigerian society and are helping to shape perceptions.

Theories of Media Effects

Theories about media and communication attempt to explain the underlying processes of media and how we interact with media and how media affect our cultures, societies, attitudes and lives have been subjects of large body of research, systematic and scientific investigation of communication processes and effects for some time now. The basic assumption behind the concerns about the media is that what we see and hear- the signs, symbols and words can somehow affect us in ways that non- mediated communication does not.

There are various theories on media effects and how we understand the world around us. According to Pavlik and McIntosh (2011) Media theories can be divided into three broad categories: the role that signs and symbols play in cognition (semiotics), the effect of the type of medium used to convey messages (media ecology), and how media messages bracket or frame our worldviews (framing and agenda-setting) However, for the purpose of this study Semiotics which is the study of signs and symbols as well as Agenda Setting and Framing have been found useful in explaining our perception and understanding of hate and misinformation communication messages. Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of linguistics in his notion of signs suggests that they have two properties. These properties are the signifier, or the form or the signified or what the form represents. An image is the signifier while the signified can represent any number of things depending on the context. Context plays an important role in the audience's understanding of the signified. In semiotics, "sign" does not necessarily refer to only visual images but also words. Words are a more complex form of sign as we have to learn that certain sounds carry particular meaning which are arbitrary. The power of signs to affect our thinking should not be underestimated. That once we have learned to associate certain sounds or visual images to mean certain things, we take what we have learned as natural and tend to accept it without question. This makes the creation and use of signs to be extremely powerful as it not only affects our thinking but also directs our behavior as well. (Pavlik and McIntosh, 2011) Thus one can imagine the meanings and effect the various hate messages convey on the part of an audience. Understanding semiotics is important to the understanding of the processes of communication and how meaning is derived among people and culture.

The Agenda Setting concept of the media has been found to be important in shaping our perception of what issues are important depending on their prominence in the media. Bernard Cohen, the political scientist articulated the agenda-setting model of the media when he stated "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" McCombs and Shaw's research showed how different media play different roles in the agenda setting process. For instance, historically, newspapers have been found to set the general agenda of public issues such as whether the public sees the issue of taxes, education, crime or health to be more important. While electronic media of television and radio were found to be effective at shaping the public's view on which of those issues are important. Although much of the research has tended to focus on the traditional media, in more recent research questions about the agenda setting role of the Internet and online media in shaping or molding public opinion are beginning to be asked. However, when the concept of framing is combined with the agenda setting function of the media, it shows the power of the media. Framing is done in all forms of mass communication. It relies on the notion that we classify, organize and interpret things into certain schema. Frames act much like signs and symbols in semiotics in that once we have accepted certain frames of reference in our mental picture, they appear natural and they go unquestionably. For instance, frames shape our perceptions about people, places, issues and events. Agenda setting and framing when combined with the echo effect of the Internet can converge to shape our perceptions of the world. The discussion on how media affects people and shapes their attitudes and behavior has been examined. The notion that media could harm people has been well established in communication research. With new and powerful technologies such as film, radio, television and the new social media, that can reach millions of people at once, it is not hard to envisage the power that the media could have over people.

Methodology and Approach to the study

In order to examine the use of hate messages in the social media, two of the prominent political contestants out of the numerous presidential candidates contesting for the office of the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria contest were selected. The choice of the two political contestants is informed by the fact that they and their followers have been the most predominant in the use of the social media for political campaign. Although remarkably, almost all the political contestants to the office of the president all use the different social media platforms to reach the electorates. With an estimated 80 million Nigerians online, social media plays a huge role in national debates about politics.

The 2023 media campaign have seen an upsurge in the use of the social media platforms for political campaign. Social media has become a powerful tool for politicians and their supporters to mobilize voters and spread their messages. However, when the Twitter handle of the All Progressive Congress Party (APC) contestants and the Labor Party candidates were examined, they were outstanding in the use of the social media for political campaign. While the Labor Party is one of the several opposition parties contesting to defeat the ruling All Progressive Congress party, its supporters have been found to be the most vociferous in the use of the social media platform. The Presidential contestant for the APC is the 70-year-old Bola Ahmed Tinubu who was two-term Governor of Lagos State in the Southwest Nigeria. While the contestant for the Labour Party is Peter Obi who is relatively younger (62 years) and has also been a two-term Governor of Anambra State in the South east Nigeria. He is most popular among the youth who are mostly on the social media.

A BBC Global Disinformation Team has discovered that political parties secretly pay social media influencers to spread disinformation about their opponents ahead of the February 2023 presidential elections. The BBC's Global Disinformation Team spoke to whistle-blowers working for two of Nigeria's political parties, and prominent influencers who have described it as "an industry".

According to the BBC investigation, the whistle-blowers say parties give out cash, lavish gifts and government contracts. Social media influencers are paid up to 20m naira (\$45,000; £37,000) for delivering a result. Some are given gifts.

While, “Other people prefer to be given board membership or, be appointed a special assistant?” (BBC, Jan 19th 2023) Influencers are assigned false narratives and fake stories are developed to improve their candidate’s chances. to post on their social media page. The BBC investigation confirmed multiple influencers who confirmed that they receive cash payments in exchange for spreading false political posts.

For instance, the BBC investigation found One influencer who asked not to be named - with almost 150,000 Facebook followers – confessed that he is paid by political parties to post completely false stories about other political opponents.
Tactics

“Our investigation uncovered different tactics used to reach more people on Twitter.

Many play on divisive issues such as religious, ethnic and regional differences.

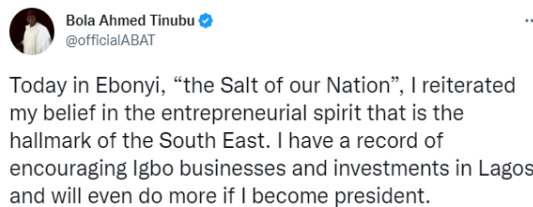
In July, influencers widely shared posts associating Kashim Shettima, the APC's candidate for vice-president, with members of the Islamist militant group Boko Haram.

This false narrative gained momentum on Twitter and was shared thousands of times, spilling onto WhatsApp and other platforms.

Using reverse image search, we found that those in the picture with Mr. Shettima were nomadic Fulani parents whose children he had enrolled in secular schools in 2017, not members of Boko Haram.”

The Twitter social media handles of the Presidential contender of the APC party, Bola Ahmed Tinubu- (BAT’s handle @officialABAT) and the Labour Party contender, Peter Obi (@PeterObi) were analyzed for hate speech over a five-month period from the time the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) signaled political parties to commence campaign on September 28, 2022. It is noteworthy that even before the official declaration of campaigns to begin, the political parties had already began campaigning on social media and political hate speech were being traded across party lines on the social media by supporters of the main political parties.

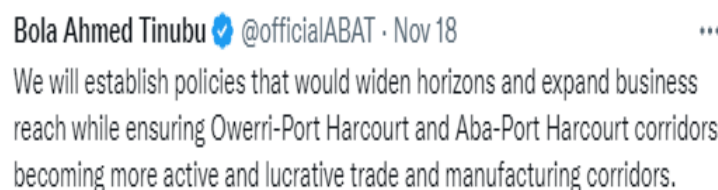
On the official Twitter handle of Bola Ahmed Tinubu, updates are given about campaigns in various states. A number of comments and what can be termed as hate speech is directed towards Tinubu by supporters who mostly align with Labour Party. For instance, at the campaign in Ebonyi State, the message below was sent on BAT’s handle @officialABAT.



Many tweets responding to this that can be termed offensive bordered on his health issues, age and the allegations that he was a drug lord. Some tweets were in pictures but there were hashtags used to describe how they perceived him. The indications are that discontent towards him can be broadly categorized in three aspects: his history and former life, his health and his party.

The names that were used after his Ebonyi outing included, vegetable, identity thief, *were* (which means a mad person in Yoruba), others include shaky shaky daddy which points to his frail health. There were also words like baba blu or blublu blabla, which can be interpreted as gibberish or high level of incoherence. There was also interest in his alleged drug trafficking record and for this reason there are several tweets about saying no to drug lords. He is also called the president of sickness.

During the campaign in Imo state, one of the messages that was twitted on his handle is below.



This generated tweets and as a result of what Tinubu may have attempted to say, a number of response pointed out that he was talking gibberish. So the phrase *blu blu blah blah* was used to describe him with slight variations. Others used the term *moo moo(mumu)* (translated as fool) and others call him BAT shit and scam. He was also addressed as thiefnubu and *mai pampers* (someone who wears pampers) and Pablo Escobar and *jaga jaga* (something that is bad), *agbado* lord *jagabandit* drug Lord. Others made allusion that he is synonymous with bad governance and came up with antiBATterial drugs that Nigerians should take to prevent bad governance. He is also described as a corrupt sick man. *Yeye* man go rest (a man of no consequences, a useless man). The preponderance of hate messages on the social media has made the contender of the APC Presidential candidate to confess that he had stopped his social media because it gives him high blood pressure. “I don’t go to social media anymore because it gives me high blood pressure. They abuse the hell out of me” (Taiwo, George 2023 Daily Trust February, 19th.p 30)

When Peter Obi the Labour candidate’s Twitter handle is examined there are responses that contain hate messages.



Peter Obi ✓
@PeterObi

...

Breaking Down the concept of Consumption to Production. This is our envisaged path from consumption to production for Nigeria.

We have a three-tracked plan aimed at achieving Goal 12 of the SDG, namely ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns.

4:45 PM · Nov 27, 2022

A number of responses to the above tweet may be translated as hate speech. However, the interest seems to be in how he will not be able to achieve what he says he will achieve if he becomes president. Most of the concerns stem from what he achieved as governor for 8 years. So words like “thieves too save”, *mumu*, scam, hushpuppy, emergency president, *Ewu* (goat), catfish and *zombidients* are used to describe him. As compared to what is written about Tinubu, the frequency of what can be considered hate speech is fewer for Peter Obi. Following a comment about his education, people made various comments and mostly on the fact that he is a liar. Others include clown, and *Lamba Nannu* and *Lamba King*. (Lamba is a Nigerian comedian that is known for lying) Obidiots.

During the presidential campaigns by the Peoples Democratic Party in the Northeastern part of the country held on the 8th of February 2023, in Damaturu, the Yobe State capital the home region of the Vice Presidential candidate of the APC , Senator Kashim Shettima, the APC had alleged that a PDP political chieftain, Dino Malaye had thrown highly offensive and derogatory language using very abusive words on the Vice Presidential candidate of the APC in Hausa language “*UBANSA YACI KUTUMAN UWARSA*” The APC party campaign in the North- East took a whole page advert on page 32 in the Daily Trust Newspaper of February 11th, 2023 to condemn the act and called for an apology by the PDP party within 24 hours and a retraction of the abusive language. (Daily Trust, February 11th, 2023)

Electoral and Broadcast Guidelines Against Hate Political Campaigns.

However, in order to guide the conduct of political campaigns following previous experience in which many parties resorted to Hate Speech in the media, especially the social media the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) has come up with new Electoral Guidelines that are designed to make the electoral campaigns more descent and devoid of hate and dangerous speech.

Section 92. of the Electoral Act 2022 states as follow—

- 1) A political campaign or slogan shall not be tainted with abusive language directly or indirectly likely to injure religious, ethnic, tribal or sectional feelings.
- (2) Abusive, intemperate, slanderous or base language or insinuations or innuendoes designed or likely to provoke violent reaction or emotions shall not be employed or used in political campaigns.
- (3) Places designated for religious worship, police stations, and public offices shall not be used— (a) for political campaigns, rallies and processions; or b) to promote, propagate or attack political parties, candidates or their programmes or ideologies

Similarly, the National Broadcasting Commission in its 6th NBC Broadcasting Code makes provisions against Hate Speech in the Broadcast media.

Under the PROFESSIONAL GUIDELINES 3.1.2

No broadcast shall encourage or incite to crime, lead to public disorder or hate, be repugnant to public feelings or contain offensive reference to any Person or organization, alive or dead or generally be disrespectful to human dignity.

3.1.3 Hate speech is prohibited; therefore, a Broadcaster shall not transmit any programme, programme promotion, community service announcement or station identity, which is likely, in any circumstance, to provoke or perpetuate in a reasonable person, intense dislike, serious contempt or severe ridicule against a person or groups of people because of age, colour, gender, national or ethnic origin, disability, race, religion or political leanings.

Also in the same Code, Section 3.6 states that broadcasting shall be in GOOD TASTE AND DECENCY

3.6.1 Obscene, indecent, vulgar language, lewd and profane expression, presentation or representation is NOT ALLOWED The Broadcasting Code provides that religious broadcasting shall not be subject of ridicule or profanity. For instance, under RELIGIOUS PROGRAMMING:

Section 4.3.1 states that: Religious beliefs and practices are central to a people's existence and capable of evoking strong passions and emotions.

Nigeria is a country with different faiths and varying sensibilities and sensitivities. To avoid offending any religious belief or practice, broadcasters shall adhere to the following:

CLASS B 52 a. Equal opportunities and equitable airtime shall be made available to all religious groups in the community it serves.

b. Religious programmes shall be presented respectfully and accurately.

c. Religious broadcast, over which content, members of a specific religion exercise control, shall be presented by responsible representatives of the given religion.

d. Religious broadcast shall not contain an attack on, or a ridicule of another religion or sect.

e. The broadcaster shall avoid the casual use of names, words or symbols regarded as sacred by believers of a given faith.

In enacting the Cyber Crime (Prohibition, Prevention ETC) Act, 2015 the National Assembly took cognizance of the public concern over the use of social media to promote bigotry and hatred in the society. Hence, the law has provisions to prohibit any form of cybersquatting and prevent anti-social individuals and groups from subjecting the Nigerian people to racist and xenophobic attacks in any part of the country.

For instance, Sections 24 and 26 of the Act provides as follows: “

(1) Any person who knowingly or intentionally sends a message or other matter by means of computer systems or network that- (a) is grossly offensive, pornographic or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character or causes any such message or matter to be so sent; or (b) he knows to be false, for the purpose of causing annoyance, inconvenience danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, ill will or needless anxiety to another or causes such a message to be sent: commits an offence under this Act and shall be liable on conviction to a fine of not more than N7,000,000.00 or imprisonment for a term of not more than 3 years or to both such fine and imprisonment.

The 2023 Elections and Hate Campaigns.

Despite the elaborate Guidelines that have been put in place in the new Electoral Reforms of 2022 and the New Broadcasting Codes that were recently enacted to act as a check against hate and dangerous political campaigns we find that the political actors have resorted to the same hate campaigns not minding whether the laws are there or not. It would seem the politicians seem oblivious of these laws. For instance, in one of the interactions with a Northern Nigerian socio-cultural group- The Northern Elders Forum, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Presidential candidate, Atiku Abubakar said that “Northerners would reject Yoruba and Igbo contestants for the presidency of 2023 elections because he is the only pan- Nigerian deserving Northern votes. When political aspirants find themselves in the midst of their people they appeal to base sentiments (religion and ethnicity). This is of course in a bid to win the votes of those they regard as their immediate constituency. Atiku Abubakar violated the Electoral law by making such assertions. Section 97 of the Electoral Act states: “A candidate, person or association that engages in campaigning or broadcasting based on religious, tribal or sectional reason to promote or oppose a particular political party or the election of a particular candidate, commits an offence under this Act and is liable on conviction to (a) a maximum fine of N1million or imprisonment for a term of 12 months or both and (b) in case of a political party, to a maximum of N10 m”

This is found to be true for all the presidential aspirants. For instance, the Labour Party Presidential flagbearer, Peter Obi is also known for "such appeals to base, ethnic sentiments" Obi also played religious politics in the predominantly Christian Anambra State: he played Catholics against Anglicans, which many people from Anambra have protested against. Not surprisingly, his campaign was also decidedly colored by religion, which is reflected in the demographic profiles of his presidential campaign council. Peter Obi's supporters comprising of youth who are mostly from the Southeast region of Nigeria are the most vociferous on the social media, especially Twitter, but are also found to be very active on Facebook, Instagram and blogs. They are very abusive and hurl insults with some of them claiming to be members of the proscribed IPOB/ They call themselves OBI'DIENT.

After his candidacy was endorsed by the Labour Party, Peter Obi embarked on a tour of churches to subtly seek their endorsement. Church leaders enthusiastically embraced him being the only Christian in the race. Some church leaders even went as far as pouring curses on anyone who planned to vote same faith ticket, suggesting sometimes openly that Mr. Obi was the man to vote for. Other church leaders shockingly became openly partisan attending campaign rallies and praying for Peter Obi. Christian associations, particularly, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, (PFN) and Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) also rallied round against same faith ticket which they decried as insensitive and an attempt to ensure Muslim domination. The faith of the candidate became a determining factor of who to vote for and in many respect too, his ethnic background. What the candidates have to offer did not matter to them but the faith they profess. The campaign against the same faith ticket was more strident in the Southwest and the Middle Belt regions. The Southwest was known for its religious tolerance before and the faith of candidates didn't matter much but suddenly a wave of religious sectarianism had engulfed the region following the pronouncement of a "Muslim-Muslim" ticket.

Irredentism has taken stage with groups calling themselves "Yoruba Nation" Igbo Race or Biafra Land and Oduduwa Republic becoming very active in the demand for more stake in the Nigeria Project. For instance, prior to the Northern Governors of the All Progressive Congress Party (APC) declaring their non interest to contest the 2023 presidential elections and throwing their support behind a southern Nigerian candidate, a significant number of people in the Southwest had become very loud about the demand for restructuring of the country and some had become indifferent and would not mind if the election itself-did not hold, in their determination to ensure power rotation and a break from the Northern hegemonic rule. So too, is the demand by the separatist groups of Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB). For long, the Southeast has been clamoring to produce the next president of Nigeria who will be of Igbo extraction. The Southeast has in recent times been a hotbed of violence and killings by IPOB and Eastern Security Network (ESN) followers who have attacked and killed northerners. A certain Simon Ekpa residing in Finland has been sending video messages in social media from overseas asking the Southeasterners to obey a sit-at-home order and not to participate in the 2023 elections. He has also been advocating for violence They have also demanded for the closure of shops and enforced a sit-at-home rule. Furthermore, they have vowed that the 2023 elections will not take place in the Southeast of Nigeria in reaction to the incarceration of the leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra, (IPOB) Nnamdi Kanu. As an outwards manifestation of the hate and dangerous speech we find that of recent no less than seven INEC offices have been attacked and burnt in Enugu, Imo, Anambra, and Ebonyi States and scores killed by hoodlums. Similar attacks have also been carried out in Abeokuta South Local Government of Ogun State and Ede South Local government of Osun State. There has also been an intensified attack on government and security agencies instilling fear on INEC officials and those who come out to register or collect their Permanent Voters Card (PVC).

As we monitor the conventional media and the social media there seems to be an escalation of hate speech and there is every indication that there hasn't been much change in terms of the de-escalation of hate and dangerous speech. The fact is, that, since independence, Nigeria has had a history of very divisive and feisty politics. As such, hate and dangerous speech did not emanate from today's politics, but it is observed that this type of politics which has a tendency to degenerate into hatred and result into violence has been around since the First Republic. Sir Bryan Sharwood Smith, the last Colonial Governor of Northern Nigeria in his "Recollections of British administration in the Cameroons and Northern Nigeria, 1921-1957: But Always As Friends." Captures eloquently the type of divisive ethno- regional politics that characterized the Nigerian First Republic.

"In Sokoto Province the political awakening in the North and the interregional rivalries that followed were now beginning to take effect in the larger towns, and trouble was not far distant. Far away to the south Zik's efforts to arouse in his fellow Ibo a sense of pride in their origins and an intention to make their future their own had lit a fire the smoke of which was being observed with growing trepidation in other parts of Nigeria.

In speeches to the Ibo State Assembly he had proclaimed that "the martial prowess of the Ibo, at all stages of human history, has enabled them . . . to adapt themselves to the role thus thrust upon them by history, of preserving all that is best and most noble in African culture and tradition." "The Ibo giant," he said, "is waking from his stupor. . . ." "A mighty nation shall rise again in the West of the Sudan . . . [and] the Ibo shall emerge . . . to re-write the history written by their ancestors. . . . The God of Africa has willed it." Heady stuff like this made disturbing reading to Yoruba leaders, however scornfully they might maintain that literacy in Iboland was something of an innovation and that these glimpses into the past bore little relation to known facts.

Obafemi Awolowo had recently returned to Nigeria and, almost simultaneously, flourishing branches of his Egbe Omo Oduduwa took root in Lagos and Ibadan and in other towns. In the North, on the first attempt to organize the tiny educated minority of the region under the auspices of the Old Boys' Association of Katsina College had failed owing to opposition from the more reactionary Chiefs [and Emirs] and their following.

But, though it had ceased to function openly, it had at least enabled the handful of educated Northerners with liberal ideas on social and political matters to maintain contact with each other. Now, at last, their discussions had borne fruit, and a new movement, named the Northern People's Congress of Today had come into being. One memorable Sunday morning,

meetings had taken place at Zaria and Kaduna under the chairmanship of a mission-trained Hausa doctor named Dikko and Malam Rafih, a traffic inspector on the Nigerian Railway.

These two were almost the only Northerners who held senior posts in government service. The object of both meetings was to form a political party, but as government general orders prohibited the participation of government officials in politics, the organizers had felt that it was wiser to begin with a cultural cover story. This was the reason for the use of the word “Today” in the name chosen. Tomorrow, things would be different. One of the prime movers and the first treasurer was Malam Abubakar Imam.

Ibo politicians and journalists took little notice of the Northern People’s Congress, but they at once attacked the Egbe Omo Oduduwa of the Yoruba. Outright war was declared in an editorial in the Pilot: “The cry must be one of battle” against the EOO, proclaimed the writer, ‘at home and abroad, uphill, and down dale, in the streets . . . and in the residence of its advocates. . . It must be crushed to the earth. . . There is no going back, until the Fascist organization . . . has been dismembered.’ Apart from newspaper attacks, leaders of the Egbe were physically assaulted, and damage was done to houses and property. The Yoruba, though less aggressive by nature than the Ibo, did not take this lying down and reacted sharply in the columns of their own press and on the political platform.

Both parties acquired militant wings under the guise of youth movements. These bodies furnished “shock troops” who “kept order” at political meetings, if brutal assaults on the persons of critics and sympathizers with other points of view can be termed keeping “order.” Charges and countercharges of the excesses committed by lorry-loads of young cudgel-carrying hooligans began to be a commonplace in the daily press.

In 1949 tension between Ibo and Yoruba spread to Gusau, where there were large communities of both races. The direct trunk telephone line to Sokoto was still not completed, and the quickest and most reliable way of communication was by fast car. We had, therefore, to be very much on our toes, particularly as tribal rioting would provide a perfect excuse for the sturdy rogues from French territory and all over the North, who formed the casual labor force, to begin burning and looting on their own among the warehouses and spirit stores of the business area. “(Sharwood Smith, B 1969)

In the more recent campaign to elect candidates for the 2023 election particularly, in the social media, we have seen more religious divisiveness in the choice of Presidential and Vice- Presidential candidates by the major political parties. The divisions along ethno-religious lines has polarized Nigeria whether as Christians versus Muslims or South against the North or the South east against the North/ Southwest alliance in the political contestation for power. For instance, the Labour Party candidate who is ethnically Igbo has his supporters drawn from the Southeastern and South South part of the country which historically was the Eastern Region of Nigeria, while the APC candidate who is from the Yoruba speaking part of the country has his support mainly drawn from the Southwestern part of Nigeria while the third contender who is of the PDP party is from the Northern part of the country where the Hausa/ Fulani speaking ethnic group is predominant. The campaign has seen pastors using the pulpit to mobilize their followers in churches to get registered and obtain their Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs) in order to prepare to vote against the “Muslim- Muslim” ticket during the 2023 Presidential election. The campaigns are seen in many of the videos that have gone viral in the social media especially WhatsApp. Women and youth that form a very large voting block have become targets for religious campaigns using base sentiments. The sharing of ethnic and religious bigotry is not only confined to the churches and social media platforms, the hatred and polarization that religious sensitivities generates extends to Muslim preachers who have also learnt to use the social media to spread venomous hate messages. Derogatory and vitriolic comments containing abusive and inciting language characterize some of the videos shared across several platforms in the social media. Sometimes, the divisiveness is within the church itself for instance, the Lagos Chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Bishop Stephen Adebite had come publicly to endorse the presidential candidate of the All Progressive Congress party, Bola Tinubu (a Muslim) amid the resentment by Christians against the Muslim- Muslim ticket. He justified his support for Tinubu based on what he claimed Tinubu had done for the Christians in Lagos State. Tinubu who is married to a Christian wife is said to have given five plots of land in choice areas in Ikeja Lagos to build the secretariat of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN). Tinubu also returned missionary schools which were taken over by the government back to their former owners. Schools such as St. Gregory’s College, Holy Child College, Obalende, Methodist Boys High School on Victoria Island, Methodist Girls High School in Yaba, Igbobi College in Yaba and many others. Tinubu is also said to have ensured the government sponsorship of many Christian members of the Christian Pilgrims Board of Lagos to travel to the holy land. Moreover, when the Christians demanded for a Christian Governor of Lagos State, Tinubu accepted that a Christian must also rule Lagos State as a governor and that was why Akinwumi Ambode became a governor and when he was denied a second tenure, the church prevailed on Tinubu to allow Babjide Sanwo Olu (a Christian) to become its governor. The church also stood solidly behind Babajide Sanwo-Olu to be given a second term in office because they claimed Muslims had ruled Lagos for 15 years therefore a Christian should be allowed to rule Lagos for another four years to which Tinubu is said to have agreed to. (see Punch, October 22, 2022 p2)

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, social media has come to play a central role in Nigeria’s politics, especially during elections and it is being used to further polarize and divide the society, despite the plethora of electoral guidelines that have been designed to safeguard elections and ensure that they are devoid of religious and ethnic divisiveness.

In the 2023 elections all the presidential candidates of most of the major contending parties have been found to have breached all the electoral guidelines that have been put in place to safeguard against hate speech and misinformation. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has so far not reacted to the electoral breaches by the candidates whose supporters have become very active online.

When hate manifest in either the conventional or social media, misinformation, disinformation and fake news all could be used. Hatred is conveyed in the social media using abuse, insult and derogatory language. Twitter and Facebook remain the widely used medium for spreading hatred and misinformation which is passionate and sometimes irrational and a highly charged interchange among contending parties. To enforce the electoral guidelines, it may be necessary to set up an Electoral Tribunal to try cases of Electoral rules violation by political parties and their candidates. The normal courts have too numerous cases to contend with that cases take a long while to adjudicate. During electioneering campaigns, all the categories outlined in the Susan Benesch schema is accommodated within the 8 categories of Hate and Dangerous Speech.

More and more of the hate speech on social media are being translated into reality with the violence and activities of separatists' movements being actualized, especially with the burning of INEC offices in several parts of the country.

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