

Chapter 6

Fake News, Hate Speech and Nigeria's Struggle for Democratic Consolidation: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

In addition to looking at the ongoing election campaigns in Nigeria, past election campaigns both locally and globally (especially since Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and the 2016 presidential election in the United States) have highlighted how fake news and hate speech can be used to cause political instability in society. Ever since, fake news and hate speech issues and their impacts on democratic processes have gained widespread research attention. Hence, an urge exists to not only further understand the concepts of fake news and hate speech but also to define them based on empirical and critical literature. This chapter intends to clearly provide further understanding about the definition of fake news through a redefinition of the concept based on a critical review of literature. Also, critically discussed in this chapter are the impacts both fake news and hate speech can have on the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria. Some policy recommendations are offered.

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INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's political arena is tense and given the increasing security threats in different parts of the country, perceived marginalization, anger, confusion and economic challenges, there is a tendency that political actors can take advantage of these lapses either to misinform, disinform, promote apathy or skew voting choices for the forthcoming elections (CDD, 2018a&b; Pate, 2018). These issues deserve serious attention from all: they offensively, progressively and relentlessly destroy relationships, heighten animosities across communities and threaten democratic survival in the country (CDD, 2018a&b; Pate, 2018 September 7).

Nigeria is experiencing tense and difficult times – multiple conflicts, heightened political horse-trading, war against systemic and widespread corruption, debilitating poverty, weak institutions, threats of secession, etc. despite that, these are also times of free flow of information courtesy of the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT) that have tremendously democratized and simplified access and dissemination of information across boundaries and in real time (Ibrahim & Adamu, 2016; Pate, 2018 September 7). Furthermore, it is during these times that Nigeria, like many other countries, is battling with the rise in populism politics, radicalization, extremism, terrorism, drug and human trafficking, ethnic nationalism, hate and dangerous speech, fake news and willful rewriting of the country's history, among others. Indeed, these are critical times for the media, the electoral process and the country (Agbese, 2017 December 31; Aminu, 2018 September 30).

The political climate in Nigeria has changed rapidly in recent years, signaling new developments and challenges to the country's young democratic system. By and large, politics has evolved due to the development of information and communication technology (ICT) (CDD, 2018 August 2; Pate, 2018 September 7). The different interconnected parts of the country have become ever more pervasive, ubiquitous and prominent. This, in turn, has amended both the delivery and form of communication of political ideas within Nigeria's democratic system, as well as shifted and undermined the accountability for those messages. What used to be labelled as 'yellow journalism' and 'character assassination/slander', acts that have been ethically and morally frowned at (Agbese, 2017 December 31) have suddenly metamorphosed into 'fake news' and 'hate speech', buzzwords that sound 'bigger' and portend more devastating effects in the society especially given that both are now more easily fueled and spread by the power of modern technology (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018 November 21). These buzzwords raise growing concerns that the electorate (Nigerian votes) are constantly accessing content which is inaccurate and/or misleading without adequate, or any, prior control (gatekeeping) or verifiable attribution (Agbese, 2017 December 31; Hankey, Marrison, & Naik, 2018).

There is a wider lack of understanding of the concept of fake news and hate speech despite recent scandals (e.g., those involving the 2016 election that brought the United States' President, Donald Trump to power), of how media platforms (especially internet media or social media, or 'dark web') aid the spread of fake news and hate speech, and what steps could or should be taken to make political communication and advertising accountable, by political parties and actors (Hankey et al., 2018) for the development and sustainability of Nigeria's democratic system. The worst part of the whole thing is that the current breed of 'yellow journalism' and 'character assassination' known as 'fake news' and 'hate speech' respectively are largely modern technology-dependent (e.g., social media platforms and the internet) than traditional technologies such as radio, Tv, newspaper or magazine (Okoro, Abara, Umagba, Ajonye, & Isa, 2018; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018 November 21).

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