



Fake News and Hate Speech in Nigeria's Development and Security Trajectory: A Qualitative Assessment

Olusegun Fariudeen Liadi¹, Musediq Olufemi Lawal Author², Olawale Olufemi Akinrinde^{3*}

¹Fountain University, Nigeria

²Osun State University, Nigeria

³University of Johannesburg, South Africa

olusegunliadi@gmail.com¹, musediq.lawal@uniosun.edu.ng², oakinrinde@uj.ac.za^{3*}

*Corresponding Author

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Abstract

The proliferation of false news and hate speech in Nigeria is posing a severe barrier to information sharing. The ease with which people now propagate destructive views across numerous social platforms complicates the situation even further. Despite multiple studies on the subject in Nigeria, what drives the spread of false news and hate speech and how it affects the country's security and prosperity remain elusive in the existing literature. This study, therefore, seeks to address that vacuum by delving deeply into the complex dynamics behind these concerns in Nigeria and investigating how they influence the country's security and prosperity. To grasp the entire scale of false news and hate speech, this study conducted extensive research that included reviewing old documents and conducting in-depth interviews with a varied range of people. The findings of this study indicated that young people are more exposed to the negative consequences of false news and hate speech. The pull of social media and its active debates frequently draws children into situations where they are more likely to encounter incorrect and nasty remarks. Recognizing youth as a significant demographic affected by this issue is critical. It implies that the government must take specific action to address the underlying causes and repercussions of false news and hate speech in Nigeria. This study, as a result, emphasizes the critical necessity for proactive actions to defend Nigeria's news and information-sharing procedures and platforms. Policymakers may aid Nigerian society by enacting legislation and protections to prevent the detrimental impact of fake news and hate speech. Ultimately, these initiatives can result in a more educated and inclusive public discussion.

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INTRODUCTION

The major means by which to keep informed about current events, subjects, and noteworthy personalities throughout the world is through the news. While its primary goal is to inform and educate, it also has the ability to entertain. The demand for candor and impartiality in conveying essential facts regarding key events relevant to its audience is critical to its efficacy. However, in recent years, there has been a noteworthy increase in news reports characterized as negative, leading to their classification as false or regarded as instilling hate against persons or institutions. This emphasizes the ubiquity of false news and hate speech in today's cultural scene, both internationally and particularly in Nigeria, as emphasized by Pate & Ibrahim (2020), who suggest that these phenomena have existed throughout human history.

In modern discourse, fake news is described as misleading narratives masquerading as actual material, which are frequently spread via media platforms (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). These narratives are deliberately false and can have catastrophic effects (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The phrase fake news has become highly heated, commonly used to attack journalism's legitimacy (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). The 2016 US presidential elections constituted a watershed moment in the spread of false news and inaccurate information into the political realm (Albright, 2016). Similarly, hate speech refers to many types of insulting or violent rhetoric directed at individuals or groups based on variables such as religion, race, or gender (Bahador, 2020). Hate speech, which is frequently associated with false news, poses significant challenges to social cohesion and political stability, particularly in diverse countries such as Nigeria (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The proliferation of false news in Nigeria is driven by political reasons and ethnic conflicts, which are aided by the extensive use of social media. Misinformation is easily spread on social media platforms, altering public views and political events (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Hate speech fuels existing tensions, resulting in bloodshed and societal upheaval. Supports ethical journalism and media literacy programs to solve these concerns. However, policing false news and hate speech without infringing on free speech is a huge difficulty.

Several previous studies such as Targema & Lucas (2018), Dongsong, Zhou, Kehoe, & Kilic (2016), Sule, (2015), and Tandoc, Lim, & Ling (2018) have emphasized the importance of politics and ethno-religious concerns in the dissemination of false news and hate speech. Another study related to fake news was conducted by Balestrucci (2020), which examines the potential target audience of misinformation on social media. Tambini (2017) elaborates on how public policy responds to fake news in several countries such as China, Italy, and the UK. Meanwhile, Mavridis (2018) examines the methods and tools Greek users implement to spot fake news on social media and counter its spread. Nonetheless, there are still limited studies that emphasize the impact of fake news and hate speech on the security and development context, especially in Nigeria. Thus, it is critical to understand the contextual drivers of false news and hate speech in Nigeria, as well as the ramifications for security and prosperity. This study attempts to bridge the gap in understanding and provide insights into successful tactics for combating false news and hate speech within the Nigerian public spectrum.

METHODS

This study investigated the complex intersectionality of false news and hate speech using content and discourse analysis in this study. This study included reviewing historical data on fake news and hate speech, as well as personal knowledge gathered

via in-depth interviews (IDI). Interviewees included both active and retired journalists, legal experts, human rights campaigners, and researchers with expertise in mass media, economics, and development studies. This study carefully picked four participants from each of these categories, totaling 24, depending on their knowledge and participation in the media field. Participants were picked specifically for their insightful views since they represent a variety of opinions on the media scene. The data acquired from these interviews was thoroughly analyzed to derive useful insights. This study ensured that all participants gave informed permission before each interview and maintained their anonymity throughout the study unless they were specifically asked differently. This method aims to guarantee secrecy while also providing a safe forum for free conversation and investigation of the complex problems surrounding false news and hate speech.

The Crisis Communication Theory

In Nigeria, the confluence of false news and hate speech has emerged as a key barrier to the country's prosperity and security. W. Timothy Coombs and his Crisis Communication Theory are crucial to understanding this issue. According to (Coombs, 2007), crises are circumstances that endanger key stakeholders and can ruin an organization's reputation. Coombs presented the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), commonly referred to as the Crisis Communication Theory, emphasizing the necessity of changing communication techniques depending on the type and severity of the crisis (Coombs, 2007).

The SCCT categorizes crises into three types: victim, unintentional, and avoidable (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992), emphasizing the significance of personalizing communication responses to each crisis's specific needs. Applying SCCT to the difficulties of false news and hate speech in Nigeria entails recognizing them as possible crises, assessing their influence on national stakeholders, and customizing communication responses appropriately. In terms of the SCCT's application to false news and hate speech in Nigeria, the process begins with determining the sort of crisis connected with each. When specific groups or people are targeted in fake news and hate speech, crises can develop as victim crises. Accidental crises can occur as a consequence of the inadvertent transmission or misunderstanding of information, whereas avoidable crises might come from insufficient attempts to combat disinformation. Furthermore, fake news and hate speech have destroyed faith in Nigerian institutions, hampered governance, and shattered societal cohesiveness, undermining the country's development aspirations. Crisis communication, driven by SCCT, becomes crucial in reducing these impacts by restoring trust, explaining government actions, and encouraging educated public conversation.

The security consequences remain severe, with the potential to incite violence, aggravate existing conflicts, and threaten national stability. Crisis communication becomes critical in preventing security crises by addressing the core causes of fake news and hate speech, reducing tensions, and mobilizing collaborative efforts to combat misinformation. Finally, the Crisis Communication Theory provides a strong framework for analyzing and resolving the difficulties brought by false news and hate speech in Nigeria.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discourses on Fake News and Hate Speech

Hate speech and fake news are intricately intertwined in Nigeria, and they are frequently used interchangeably to characterize erroneous and controversial media content. This coexistence is facilitated by several factors, including political complexity and tensions induced by ethno-religious conflicts. Scholars such as Targema & Lucas (2018), Dongsong, Zhou, Kehoe, & Kilic (2016), Sule, (2015), and Tandoc, Lim, & Ling (2018) have all emphasized the importance of politics and ethno-religious concerns in the dissemination of false news and hate speech.

To fully grasp the dynamics of these issues in Nigerian public discourse, it is crucial to recognize the scale and relevance of ethno-religious conflicts between states and regions, as well as within groups. This contextual awareness is essential for understanding the complicated relationship between these challenges and Nigeria's sociopolitical and security landscape. Takwa (2017) and Sule (2015) revealed that politics frequently causes ethno-religious clashes. Politics connects false news with hate speech, as evidenced by the fact that a major number of ethno-religious conflicts are politically driven. Propaganda, a common political tactic, usually incorporates strategic manipulation, such as nasty name-calling and offensive statements. False news and hate speech occur as a result of ethno-religious conflicts, aggressive political culture, and deliberate propaganda.

Participants in the research emphasized the worrying ability of this combination to quickly spread disinformation and inspire violence. For example, during Nigeria's 2015 general elections, claims appeared that a Nigerian millionaire had hired Cambridge Analytica to boost then-President Goodluck Jonathan's reelection campaign. This included creating and distributing propaganda movies depicting Muhammadu Buhari, the leading opposition candidate, as a supporter of sectarian violence and an Islamist with contempt for non-Muslims, particularly members of the Igbo ethnic group. Such examples demonstrate how disinformation and strategic messaging are used in politics to shape public opinion and election results (Egbunike, 2018). Reflecting on these events, participants emphasized how false news and hate speech have become powerful weapons in Nigerian elections, promoting disinformation and divisive discourse that influence the political scene.

Trends and Dimensions of Fake News and Hate Speech

In essence, false news and hate speech are inextricably linked, frequently appearing in situations where individuals create distinctions between the "in-group" and the "out-group," or those they identify with against those they believe to be different. This interaction highlights the complicated and diverse nature of false news and hate speech. According to Bahador (2020), hate speech directed at outgroups takes three distinct forms: disparaging and dehumanizing the outgroup and its members, inciting violence against the targeted minority group, and various forms of hostile speech culminating in extreme categories, which serve as warnings of potential escalation if left unchecked. In the media, it is common and vital to thoroughly verify news material before broadcasting it on television or publishing it in print. This technique arises from the understanding that, while some news items may exaggerate, others strictly stick to factual truth. According to a participant, the presence of unsubstantiated or discredited comments propagated by media outlets, newspapers, and individuals on social media has posed several issues in today's media environment. These problems emphasize the critical need to maintain journalistic integrity and

precision in today's media landscape. This circumstance has put significant pressure on Nigerian communities, causing splits and sparking countless disagreements. Furthermore, it has put tremendous difficulties not just on those facing charges but also on their families, who sometimes endure the brunt of the fallout. The disturbing truth that unfounded rumors have led to terrible occurrences and crises across the country adds to the complexities of the situation. Recognizing the critical need to combat the spread of false news and hate speech, the Federal Government of Nigeria took a crucial step by classifying them as forms of terrorism. This step emphasizes the urgency of the situation and its far-reaching consequences (Mamah, Akinferon, Agbakwuru, & Afer, 2017; Nwozor, Ajakaiye, Okidu, Olanrewaju, & Afolabi, 2022).

Furthermore, it is critical to recognize that this dilemma extends beyond Nigeria's boundaries, igniting conversations and deliberations among global political organizations. The coordinated efforts to combat the threat of fake news and hate speech have received widespread attention in mainstream media outlets, reflecting widespread recognition of the importance of confronting these issues and preserving the integrity of information in today's interconnected world (Scott & Eddy, 2017). To go deeper into this issue, Tandoc, Lim, & Ling (2018) classified false news and hate speech depending on their goals and the strategies used to achieve them. These categories include news satire, parody, falsification, manipulation, advertisement, and propaganda (Posetti, 2017; Rahmanian, 2023; Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Fake news and hate speech are intended to deceive people by providing purposefully incorrect information, furthering propaganda, impacting political views, generating funny material, or seeking financial benefit.

Hate speech exacerbates the chaos already caused by false news by disseminating further disinformation about the people or subjects of its stories. In certain cases, hate speech originates in response to the harm caused by incorrect information, highlighting the deadly synergy between these two types of material, in which one supports the other, exacerbating the negative impact on society. The aims and content of false news and hate speech influence how they materialize. For example, they may be motivated by conspiracies aimed at sabotaging people or their endeavors, with a variety of goals such as politics, finance, propaganda, personal motivations, or leisure hobbies. In essence, false news and hate speech are inextricably linked, frequently appearing in situations where individuals create distinctions between the "in-group" and the "out-group," or those they identify with versus those they believe to be different. This interaction highlights the complicated and diverse nature of false news and hate speech. According to Bahador (2020), hate speech directed at outgroups takes three distinct forms: disparaging and dehumanizing the outgroup and its members, inciting violence against the targeted minority group, and various forms of hostile speech culminating in extreme categories, which serve as warnings of potential escalation if left unchecked.

Sources, Outlets of Fake News and Hate Speech

Information spreads across a variety of channels, including print, electronic, and social media platforms. Newspapers, periodicals, and other printed publications fall under the category of print media. Electronic media, on the other hand, expands its reach through radio, television, and the vast terrain of social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. When it comes to print media, as one of our participants pointed out, narratives about false news and hate speech circulate in the public realm in a variety of ways. These include news stories, editorials, essays, opinion pieces, and even letters to the editor. In other cases, this story may take

the form of spreading incorrect information via cartoons or graphic representations in print media. Scholars such as Balestrucci, (2020), Mavridis, (2018), and Tambini, (2017) have identified a consistent pattern in which hate speech and false news narratives frequently target specific institutions, whether people, whole ethnic communities, political parties, or religious organizations.

Taking on this observation, a study participant made an important point, demonstrating that people affiliated with political parties, religious leaders, or their ardent followers, as well as those who strongly identify with specific ethnic groups, are frequently involved in spreading false information and hatred. These tales are then used as strategic tools by individuals with ulterior objectives to advance their cause and undermine perceived opponents. This demonstrates the intentional and purposeful character of the false news narrative (Lazer et al., 2018). Another participant offered an insightful perspective on the changing societal dynamics, stating that "societies increasingly rely on social media platforms to build robust social networks, facilitate productive social lives, foster interpersonal interactions, fuel political campaigns, and facilitate economic agreements". This demonstrates the expanding role of social media in changing different elements of modern life and human connections. However, these same platforms have become vehicles for the spread of false information and hate speech in our society.

The growth of cyberspace has left an indelible effect on our media landscape and interaction dynamics, ushering in a new era of improved simplicity and rapidity in communicating data to the masses. However, this revolutionary movement highlights the media channels' dual character as both vehicles for constructive communication and dangerous vectors for the propagation of destructive information. As a result, internet platforms have taken on a central role as primary channels for spreading fake news, owing to the low cost of developing internet sites that promote misinformation content and the relative ease of developing tools for disseminating this content across multiple social media channels. It is worth noting that, despite changing forms and trends for reaching audiences, false news and hate speech have always achieved their ultimate purpose of deceiving the public. Despite continual efforts to counteract their effect, their continued success demonstrates their strong impact on altering public perceptions and views.

Historically, the negative effects of false news and hate speech were more controllable due to the strict rules that regulate conventional media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television. However, the intrinsic adaptability of social media networks for spreading information has created an environment conducive to the global spread of falsified and distorted content. In the digital era, this phenomenon has taken on a new level of danger, with current social media outlets boosting the reach as well as the impact of these stories. In today's world, social networking websites use users' actual names, and many news bulletins include comments sent through social networking websites. As a result, Górká (2019) suggests that anonymity is not the key motivator behind the dissemination of hate speech. Hate speech frequently has a snowball effect, in which animosity is met with aggressiveness, aligning with the aims and motivations of those who spread it. The media sensationalizes offensive posts, which unwittingly encourages the propagation of hatred.

Manifesting Impacts of Fake News and Hate Speech

Fake news and hate speech have considerable disruptive potential in many areas of life, severely altering civilizations by producing chaos in individual lives, politics, the

economy, and even public health, especially when targeted. Despite their intended goal of democratizing media access and consumption, they have unwittingly exacerbated a crisis in public communication, resulting in the rise of false news and hate speech. These undesirable occurrences exacerbate polarization and constitute a serious danger to the foundation of democratic government. Fake news further instills fear and worry, threatening public peace and security. It causes splits among individuals, sparking confrontations between ethnic groups and exacerbating regional tensions. The extensive propagation of fake news on many platforms has exacerbated these differences, which are frequently engineered by people with differing motivations and agendas.

Due to widespread ignorance about false news, many people unintentionally contribute to its propagation. Younger people, in particular, are prone to its impact due to their inadequate understanding of contemporary socioeconomic events. Their access to a variety of news sources makes them ideal candidates for fake news, as proven by their participation in the mayhem accompanying the End-SARS rallies in Nigeria in late 2020. Individuals who have been subjected to hate speech are stereotyped, exacerbating societal divides. The consequent impairment of their bodily and mental health can be severe, with serious medical, psychological, and social ramifications. Tragically, in some situations, these demands have caused people to consider or commit suicide, accentuating the urgency of the problem.

A sense of cohesiveness and togetherness is common in communities that value harmony and mutual understanding. However, this concord is frequently interrupted by widespread hate speech and bogus news. The urge for retribution, as well as other reasons, frequently block productive discourse and the sharing of ideas, which are critical for supporting long-term development and advancement. Politics and government operations are exposed to the negative consequences of false news and hate speech. Political viewpoints conveyed purely via insults impede meaningful debate. Fake news may have a considerable impact on political events, notably during Nigerian national elections, as politicians utilize social media platforms to increase exposure and engage with voters, particularly the younger generation (Lazer et al., 2018). As a result, social media platforms have become battlegrounds for acquiring followers and weakening competitors. During Nigeria's 2023 general elections, various politicians were targeted with misleading data and hate speech on internet platforms, impacting voter opinions.

Fake news has the potential to severely harm the economy. Organizations may deteriorate as a result of misinformation campaigns and false news, potentially leading to business closures and job losses for personnel. Furthermore, the emotional discomfort felt by hate speech victims exacerbates the problem. Despite attempts, many nations have failed to understand the dynamics underlying the viral transmission of false information. They have not guaranteed that social media platforms are subject to human rights inspection, and social media organizations have not met their commitments to counteract inaccurate information. Laws, which are usually ambiguous, provide officials with the authority to judge illegal behavior based on ill-defined ideas like 'false news', 'morals', 'risks to national security', or 'terrorism' (Eyikorogha, 2021). To decrease the effect of inaccurate data, governments must prioritize human rights by taking comprehensive measures to combat false information online, such as implementing restrictions on social media organizations and requiring them to do human rights due diligence to enhance quality reporting.

Development and Security Implications of Fake News and Hate Speech

The rise of false news and hate speech can be attributed to a variety of things. Some of these arise from profit reasons, in which people or companies create such material to increase clicks, views, likes, validation, and shares, all to increase revenues. Furthermore, there are people with strong political agendas who purposefully use systematic propaganda tactics to achieve their goals (Ciampaglia et.al., 2015; Goel et al., 2015; Zhao, Besnick, & Mei, 2015). This issue is intricately linked to the country's historical and political situation (Eyikorogha, 2021). What's more alarming is that a study has shown how false news spreads on social media, considerably outpacing the spread of legitimate news. For example, on networks like Twitter, incorrect information is 70% more likely to be disseminated than true news items. In comparison, credible news can take up to six times longer to reach the same audience (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018; Wall, 2015; Wardle, 2017). This rapid spread of damaging and misleading material via fake news and hate speech has far-reaching implications, with a long-term influence on the fundamental fabric of society.

As a result, there is a strong link between hate speech, the basic right to free expression, and general societal stability in Nigeria. According to Nwozor et al. (2022), hate speech has unfortunately become firmly embedded in Nigerian culture, and its fundamental character opposes the norms of tolerance and respect for human dignity. It frequently goes beyond just words; it has the capacity to significantly impede a nation's growth and advancement (Coleman, 2021; Nwozor et al., 2022; Posetti, 2017).

The fast spread of hate speech and fake news is connected to the presence of social media and, in certain circumstances, the attractiveness of financial incentives for people who engage with such content. Fake news and hate speech have far-reaching negative consequences for people's psychological and emotional well-being. Bekalu, McCloud, and Viswanath (2019) found that exposure to hate speech and false news increased the likelihood of unhappiness, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and even contemplating suicide. Furthermore, as Ezeibe (2021) points out hate speech has regrettably evolved into a political campaign technique in Nigeria. The 2015 general elections saw a particularly noticeable increase in similar events, highlighting the need to resolve this issue. For example, the profusion of ads, political innuendos, and messages of propaganda during Nigeria's 2015 general elections exacerbated the country's political tension and atmosphere (Fasakin, Oyero, Oyesomi, & Okorie, 2017). Unfortunately, many Nigerian media outlets have evolved into conduits for expression and propaganda, with several messages transmitted at this time comprising hate speech aimed at disparaging opponents and opposition parties.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

The proliferation of fake news and hate speech continues to afflict Nigerian society, inciting violence and cultivating animosity among individuals. The negative repercussions go beyond immediate security risks, infecting social, political, and economic institutions in a variety of ways. Instead of eliminating ignorance about critical social and political issues, false news and hate speech platforms frequently worsen it. Given Nigeria's current condition and potential for great developmental growth, it is troubling that results have shown that many Nigerians are deeply engrossed in the consumption of information coming from false news and hate speech sources. While total eradication is unachievable, the government and stakeholders must prioritize raising public awareness about the hazards of fake news and hate speech. Specifically, the government would need to prioritize additional expenditures in youth education and

empowerment, given that, as previously documented in the study, the majority of perpetrators of false news and hate speech are among the country's youth. Finally, the youth must be properly informed and equipped to capitalize on the potential of the media arena to promote harmonious coexistence, national unity, and growth.

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