

WELCOME ADDRESS

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These are interesting times. These are challenging times. New phenomena are revealing themselves, while old ones are assuming new dimensions, putting on new and dazzling appearances. Both the new and the old challenge us, demanding new thinking, understanding and explanations.

As media and communication professionals and scholars, the public depend on us for such understanding and explanations. Our society and individual experiences have become so thoroughly mediatised that it is interesting that almost all of us validate our daily experiences by referring to the news or some other media offering. We live in a media saturated society.

Yet this important meaning-making institution is facing unprecedented challenges. As the American scholar, McChesney has observed, the media is at a "critical juncture". What are the sources of the problem or what Blumler and Guretvich refer to as "Crisis of Public Communication"?

First, public trust in the media has waned over time due to ethical and professional inadequacies. There is a general belief that the media are failing in serving the public interest, and the requirements of democracy.

Related to this is the excessive commercialisation and commodification of the media. Viewership and circulation have assumed greater importance in news judgement than other social and professional values and norms. We see this in the share of entertainment programmes in the audio-visual media. In some media organisations, the separation of the news from advertisement department has been obliterated; reporters now act as advertising/marketing officers, negotiating the fees for news coverage.

A third factor is the Janus face of ICTs. ICTs have expanded the public sphere just as it has equally undermined the existing media and communication structure.

Last but not the least in the increasing influence of other communication professionals is the news / editorial production process. The power and influence of these new cultural intermediaries to borrow the term of the French theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, is in some way destabilising the news production structure, taking advantage of the unsecure borders of journalism.

Here, I am particularly referring to PR practitioners and the so called social media warriors and influencers. Spin is the nice name of the game of manipulation and/or propaganda.

Added to this conundrum is the peculiarity of Nigerian politics and society which has, since inception of the modern media, exerted a lot of influence on media practice, content, consumption and interpretation. Here I am referring to the various divisive and centri-fugal forces operating in our polity — ethnicity, religious and regional differences, and lack of elite consensus. Nigeria is a country where people who profess the same faith, worship at different altars with sometime conflicting doctrines and practices and in mutually unintelligible tongues.

Perhaps due to the high level of poverty, illiteracy and ignorance Nigerians are easily mobilised through the promotion of primordial cultural symbols.

It also appears to me that various segments of the Nigerian society have been primed to see each other as enemies. Over time, we have constructed and generated so many stereotypes and negative epithets about each ethnic group that such stereotypes and epithets can easily be mobilised and find accommodation in the cultural and social frames of a particular group. There are no core values to which we all subscribe to. Primordial sentiments and resentments based on cultural, ethnic and political polarities generate a lot of hatred and antagonism. Hate speech is more likely to thrive in this kind of social setting.

On the other hand, fake news thrives in a situation where the people lack trust in their leaders and institutions. When the people suspect the credibility of the official information, fake news at least in the form of rumour fills the vacuum. This becomes more so in a situation where media access is more or less the preserve of the powerful in government and business.

All these factors challenge our taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions about the role and power of the media. And I will argue that by extension on freedom of expression. Access to the media is open to the rich and powerful who can mobilise and deploy the required social and material resources to subsidise, and some will say, manipulate the media. The print is almost totally closed to the majority of our people in the rural areas and urban slums; they can't read and the publications are not circulated in their localities. Radio which could be said to be the people-medium has been taken over by entertainment, especially pop music. The advent of FM radio has seen the airwaves taken over by market-driven programming philosophy to the detriment of public service orientation.

Because of economic pressure and what some have called back-pack journalism, editorial oversight and leadership in the newsroom have declined. In many newsrooms, the sub-desk has been eliminated; no more fact checking. It is like anything can go as far as it will bring in money and probably not libellous. The news gate has become more porous than ever.

This is where propagandists, merchants of hate speech and fake news crash in. The internet enabled social media are ready tools though the mainstream media are not spared. At least, we are all now citizen journalists and bloggers. No license. No professional training. No commitment to any social value or ethics. The culture of commentary and punditry in the press has also contributed to problem.

We must situate the current global concern about hate speech and fake news within the appropriate socio-political context. They are not new, but their current manifestations and the moral panic they have generated, are part of the challenges of this period. The intra-media factors sketched above have been accompanied by certain extra-media factors inherent in the struggle for power by contending factors of the ruling elite. The rise of right wing political parties and populist politicians in Europe and America, the politics of identity in many parts of the world, the religious fundamentalism; and in our case, the politics of ethnicity and religion, have all created the fertile soil for the growth of the phenomenon.

Because of easy accessibility (production, dissemination, exposure and consumption), mobilisation of the technical and manpower resources (computer, internet access, personnel) and reach (elimination of distance and geographical boundaries), the social media have become the most veritable channels of generating and spreading hate speech and fake speech all over the world. The anonymity the social media guarantee make the purveyors assume the power of the harlot; power without responsibility! As the stories coming from America after the election of Trump are indicating, these groups of hate mongers and fake news factories are well resourced and organised. Their aim is to deceive the people and to destabilise the society.

The point is that the socio-political and cultural environment prevailing at a particular period is crucial in our understanding and contextualisation of what is considered as hate speech and / or fake news. Hate speech or fake news does not exist in a vacuum. They are socially situated, articulated and designed for some purposes.

In this context, I submit that the structure of the Nigerian society, the character of its politics and politicians and other elite groups, the structure of the media, the mediatisation of politics with all its sensationalism and cantankerousness; easy accessibility to technologies of production and consumption, citizen alienation from the political and economic system have made the propagation of hate speech and fake news and their consumption and interpretation quite easy and widespread.

We live in a chaotic and anarchical communication environment. Technology and the economic context of media and communication practice have altered the landscape. Old assumptions and norms are being challenged. Established hierarchies and discourse power of the elite are also being challenged. We are witnessing a new communication order. This new order poses a lot of challenge to us as scholars and professionals. More importantly, it poses a lot of challenge to democratic politics. Fake news or disinformation and hate speech are designed to influence public opinion, harm the integrity of elections and affect public policies and democratic values.

The issue of legal regulation is becoming highly contentious. For instance, any attempt to regulate or control hate speech or fake news directly challenges the idea of freedom of expression; a foundational requirement for democracy. Such an attempt readily offers an opportunity for illiberal regimes and forces of law and order to silence critical oppositional voices and counter discourses. As we are seeing in the case of Trump, powerful political actors may attempt to mislead the public by labelling any story they disagree with as hate speech or fake news. Conservative social groups, and forces of the status quo have always orchestrated moral panics over issues they disagree with or challenge their worldview or hegemony. On the other hand, to leave things as they are, is to court crisis and disaster. We must balance freedom with responsibility.

There is no easy choice, more so in a multicultural and multi-ethnic society like ours. However, one viable solution is to empower the people with critical media/information literacy skills.

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