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STOKING POLITICAL INSTABILITY: AN INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER ONE

STOKING POLITICAL INSTABILITY: AN INTRODUCTION

Nosa OWENS-IBIE

Journalism appears to be in an existential crisis stoked by a continuously evolving ecology, complicated or enhanced, depending on the argument, by the dynamics of digital technology and communication. In their report on Turkey, as part of a study of 14 countries in Europe, Elmas and Kurban (June, 2011), aligned with the description of the digital era as the “uncontrollable age”, on the one hand presenting as propellers of democratisation through the ostensible easing of participation spaces, but often subordinating in the process, how this impacts the rights and freedoms of citizens.

This character of the media ecology, has had collateral consequences, with the focus on the subject of fake news and hate speech trending in discourse and contestations in the public sphere, terrestrial or virtual. Such focus furthers the larger discussion on media content which are portrayals of reality, but are not necessarily accurate in their reflection of relationships in socio-economic and political domains. This means that the process of presenting social reality, is actually one of 're-presentation', made more germane by the obvious contraction of critical content in the media (Devereux, 2008: 187). The media are therefore arena for the coloration of reality through the prism of sources and gatekeepers driven by agendas and a worldview encapsulated in frames, which are value-laden.

That is why the position of Hodkinson (2017: 5) interrogating as simplistic, assumptions that the media either mirrors or shapes society, has an underlying logic. This position is anchored on the circular relationship that captures in any instance and process, both elements. The media as mirror argument acknowledges that media content is based on reality and subsisting cultural values and social trends, rather than products of the imagination. But media content is hardly a perfect or neutral reflection of such mirrored reality. It is evident that there is a selectivity process informed by content creators, news sources, and other media producers and gatekeepers in the information chain who often present the content in their way.

These point to the dynamism of information and communication spaces, and the structuring of those spaces by elements which keep evolving. At the intersection of this dynamic are audiences

and people whose actions, inaction and preferences have had and continue to have implications for political and other environments. It is within this context, that the attention to media narratives, and issues around hate speech and fake news, have gained prominence.

This book is a distillation of perspectives on the issues, currents and malcontents on hate speech and fake news in both traditional and new media (especially social media) domains. It covers the more general to the more specific.

The second chapter explores the ramifications of the concept of privacy and how social media has become a belt of intrusions which have increasingly upended notions of exclusivity in communication processes. A major evidence of this reality was provided with the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal in 2018, involving the world's largest social media network providing access to about 87 million profiles of users across countries to Cambridge Analytica which as a political consultancy, used the personal data so harvested, to service its clients, including the Donald Trump campaign (see Graham, M., 2018). The scandal resulted in controversies. Evidence that many countries did not have clear legislations on data protection catalysed national and international responses, which among others, has culminated in social networks reviewing their privacy policies and countries enacting legislation and reviewing policies to better protect its information and communication domains. But the vulnerabilities occasioned by the invasion of private spaces has been complicated by the intrusions of fake news. The enactment of the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc) Act 2015 is one attempt to address the challenge, but it is apparent that the solution has to incorporate digital literacy components, for more holistic outcomes.

The significance of such literacy has spawned challenges for levels of leadership, with the involvement of opinion leaders across the social strata in discourse partly to illuminate issues of hate speech and fake news. Chapter three, using qualitative methodology, therefore, focuses on cases from the perspectives of these opinion leaders. It recommends the strengthening of legislation to curb their spread on social media.

One of the more remarkable contributions in the volume is a study on social media and polarisations within the context of conversations of media influencers on Twitter. Twitter as a platform has in the wake of the Trump presidency, become a more popular tool of political communication by various actors in politics and other spheres. In Nigeria, the platform has gained in significance and the study, anchored on framing theory, examines how social media messages activate such polarisations. Readers' response to the postings of the two media influencers selected, as determined through texts, memes, smileys and pictures, were analysed as either positive, negative, neutral, sarcastic or combinations of these, and highlight the need for celebrities, who wield significant influence on their followers, to weigh the potential and real implications of their postings before sending.

Chapter five attempts a distinction, by focusing on mainstream media discussion of hate speech within the context of constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. It dissects the concept of hate speech and its negative impact on society, stating that media have capacities to promote hate speech in their news reports. It advocates the alignment of the media with regulation to promote social responsibility, noting that media literacy has prospects, among other prescriptions, of curbing the dislocations occasioned by hate speech.

The next intervention is more specific in interrogating the element of digital images and how they complicate the fake news scenario of a geographical belt of Nigeria. Issues of digital images are

part of discussion on technology-driven enablers and products of what has turned out to be a frenzy in social media spaces. The study found that respondents were not conscious of the wider implications of their sharing habits. This again, points to the centrality of media and information literacy as vital route to the appropriate behaviour on social media.

Media and information illiteracy, therefore, continue to precipitate social disorder, and chapter seven, through discourse analysis of secondary data, addresses the imperatives of some regulation without subverting the logic of the constitutional guarantees of freedom of expression. Concerns about the need to avoid censorships in attempts to control the manifest excesses translating to fake news and hate speech, are evident. This explains prescriptions on self-regulation with levels of gate-keeping within the media assuring a filtration of content as damage control. The Ombudsman is identified as critical in this equation, while other actors in the macro-environment of media environment need to be a part of fact-checking mechanisms for more credible information dissemination. The challenge posed by those outside the mainstream media, especially the voices on social media, however remain a concern.

With the enactment in 2011 of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), there has been a vigorous debate on the implementation of its provisions and domestication across Nigeria. While the FOIA provides a basis for citizen access to information of public importance, it is its implementation that remains a source of interest and scholarship, with civil society and the media at the vanguard of its full activation. The discussion of fake news, which is a product of freedoms and their interpretation, within the frame of freedom of information which seeks to promote better structured and accountable governance, therefore offers a basis for critical thinking. There are implications for the dissemination, consumption, and required steps in both activity domains.

The type of citizens being cultivated by the miasma fostered by fake news, receives attention in chapter nine. With a high misinformation and disinformation quotient, the spread of fake news threatens the fabrics of democracy and its consolidation in a country in transition, hedged in by the dynamics of manipulations and the insincerities that has further thawed what ought to have been the progressive development of developmental spaces. Digital literacy is again recommended as panacea, but with the specific prescription of its incorporation within the curriculum for required systemic impacts.

In an attempt to deconstruct the ramifications of fake news, another study targeted young adults in the university town of Okada, through focus group discussions. The study sought to determine levels of media literacy, awareness of how social media have precipitated the spread of fake news and their consciousness of the implications of fake news and half-truths. Findings showed the need for closer emphasis on media literacy as a bulwark against the challenges of fake news and half-truths.

Chapter eleven offers perspectives on response mechanisms based on a study of Benue and Delta States of Nigeria. *The study in this chapter points attention to the fact that hate speech can incite aggressive tendencies in people that are in a violent environment like Benue and Delta states in Nigeria.* Respondents perceived radio as useful in addressing the prospects of violence due to the build-up occasioned by hate speech.

Conclusion

With a score of 47.9 percent, Nigeria ranked 33rd in the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG) in 2017. In 2014 the country was 37th, showing a marginal improvement. That the index is based on various governance parameters, points to fundamental development dilemmas. Tensions engendered by politics and turf contests signposting sometimes primitive manipulation of ethnic and religious sentiments, have only further complicated the dilemmas and slowed the gains of democratisation.

The imperatives of improving the governance and development indices, suggest the need for disincentives in the public sphere specifically targeting elements like hate speech and fake news which only complicate the spaces for the enabling environments for holistic development.

The intellectual rally to forge common fronts for a strategic and tactical interrogation of the nuances and deconstruct the essence of what has spiralled into a phenomenon stoking political and other instabilities, remains a priority.

This book is a contribution with a place in the yet unravelling historical search for solutions.

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