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SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLARISATION IN NIGERIA: ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO SELECTED MEDIA INFLUENCERS' CONVERSATIONS ON DIVERSE ISSUES ON TWITTER

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CHAPTER FOUR

SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLARISATION IN NIGERIA: ANALYSIS OF RESPONSES TO SELECTED MEDIA INFLUENCERS' CONVERSATIONS ON DIVERSE ISSUES ON TWITTER

Ifedolapo ADEMOSU & Abiodun Solomon OYELEYE

Introduction

Azzimonti and Fernandez (2017) state that people often have incomplete and one-sided views of information about their world. These views then define their version of reality and affect the way they react when discussing issues of particular importance to them. While it is completely normal to have disparity of different views, in the last decade, this has manifested as sometimes extreme disagreements over perspectives on specific issues. In the last two decades, these disagreements or polarity of views have increasingly been on the increase in countries like America. Azzimonti and Fernandez ascribe the increase in polarity to the pressures that have evolved from income inequality, economic challenges and adjustments in the media. The polarised conversations on the social media space are informed by a disparity in views over specific issues that audiences are passionate about. When not properly managed, and fuelled by misinformation, the conversations can sway into the territory of hate speech which has been on the increase across the globe.

Although “fake news” or misinformation became a more frontline and popular concept in news media and general terminology after the November 2016 USA Presidential elections (Martens, Aguiar, Gomez-Herrera and Mueller-Langer, 2018) it wasn't a new concept or experience in Nigeria as the same issue had featured in the 2015 Nigerian Presidential elections with different news reports being circulated in the media and on new media platforms about candidates and political parties. There have been concerns about the level of fake news and hate speech that occupied the social media space but perhaps more worrisome is the propensity of news to be bent into different forms to achieve the intention of the message creator and the polarising effect of the content on the readers and discussants particularly in the social media space. These worries are grounded in what Lorentzen (2014, citing Sunstein, 2009) describes as the ability of new technologies and their offshoots to “fragment and polarise” users which could lead to among other things a distorted understanding of issues by the readers.

There are many views on the conceptual make-up of fake news. Marda and Milan (2018; Berger, 2018:7) opine that fake news overlaps with false or misleading information (misinformation) as well as false information spread purposively to deceive people (“disinformation and which is often orchestrated in attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them. Both disinformation and misinformation are problems for society, “but disinformation is particularly dangerous because it is frequently organised, well resourced, and reinforced by automated technology.” The UK Cambridge Dictionary (2018) refers to misinformation as “false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke” while the US Collins Dictionary explains it as “false, often sensational, information” distributed via news reports. On its part, Reuters (2017) puts fake news in different categories; first as news made up to cause scandal to others or news is rooted in fact but spun in a particular way to fit or fulfil a particular motive.

Despite the fact that the phenomenon of fake news has been talked about more in the last two years than the last decade, Martens et al (2018) traced the phenomenon to the 16th century to underscore the fact that fake news is not new but as old as the newspaper industry itself. While at the time it raised concern, measures were put in place to tackle the effect as it led to misinformation and often unfounded fears. Weisberger (2018) records the story of a radio presenter Orson Welles acting out a scenario of alien invasion and people assuming it was true. The session led to widespread panic. Although his actions were unintentional, it pointed to the effect fake news could have at the times. More recently, fake news and hate speech especially in the political sphere have become common topics of discourse due to the rise of new communication technology which has created popular distribution platforms for news and social media engagements and changed the spread, pattern and speed of information dissemination, making it not just local but global. Similarly, while agreeing that fake news and disinformation is an old story, Ireton and Posetti (2018) noted that it has greatly been spread in recent times by the evolution of new technology. *According to the Ireton and Posetti*, the 21st century has seen fake news and disinformation being “weaponised on an unprecedented scale” based on technological innovations to get loyalty and solidarity from audiences especially in the political sphere.

In order to understand what fake news is not, Reuters (2017) identified four key attributes of authentic news as (1) accuracy and reliability, (2) helping with understanding complex issues, (3) communicating strong viewpoints and opinions, and (4) providing amusing and entertaining content. It is the researchers' position that when these attributes of news are taken and manipulated, it can be dangerous to whoever is the intended audience of the fake news or hate speech especially when they interact with others with divergent views. Hence Reuters (2017) classification of fake news gives the impression that fake news can easily become hate speech against the subject of focus, when it is produced to cause scandal, or spun in a particular way to meet an ulterior motive.

Hate speech is another concept that has been bandied a lot alongside fake news leading to countries like France and Germany passing tough laws against fake news and hate speech. It has led to the institution of accountability measures for social media platforms in order to stem the spread of fake and hateful news of any sort especially because a lot of online conversations are becoming hateful and violent in nature. In order to understand what drives polarisation, Wardle & Derakshan (2017) also cited in Martins et al explain that manipulated news can cause harm and this harm can fall into three categories (1) misinformation when false information is shared, but no harm is meant, (2) disinformation when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm and (3) mal-information when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving private information into the public space. The researchers believe that once harm is involved,

the information can be categorised as hate speech. In Hong and Kim's (2016) view it is the ability of users to internalise and personalise information that may be contributing to increasing levels of extremism and political polarisation and this is often expressed in hateful language.

What then is hate speech? CEPO (2016) explains hate speech as “Speech that attacks a person or a group on the basis of race, religion, gender or sexual orientation”. Considering the possible effect of hate speech which can range from loss of credibility and even physical attacks, Racliffe (2017) states that social media push of fake news and hate speech was rampant during the 2016 American elections while the 2018 ACSPN Report on the 2015 Nigerian Presidential Election Campaign also indicates that hate speech and fake news were at the peak during that period and these issues led to polarisation across the country and led people to take misinformed decisions with long lasting consequences. But it is pertinent to note that valid news could possibly generate hate speech when there are differences in opinion. These issues were largely driven by social media platforms. Ferrara (2015) opines that while social media has been useful to the lives of millions of people, it is at the heart of the issues of hate speech and fake news due to some of its features. Bradshaw & Howard (2018:4; Marwick & Lewis, 2018) also explain that social media features allow it to be manipulated for the selfish purpose of pushing dangerous agendas, hate speech and fake news and in most instances by making people believe they are on opposing camps with regards to the discourse at play.

Statement of the Problem

At the onset of social media explorations, scholars and professionals across sectors had idealistic hopes as to how the new communication opportunities would engender unity and serve as a backbone for a stronger democratic environment. However, less than two decades later, new technology has empowered the masses globally as is evident from the Arab spring movements and Occupy revolutions across nation states (Mitchell, Brown & Guskin, 2012), it has led to even more polarized societies and isolated individuals as is evident from the ravaging issues of hate speech and fake news in recent years. The popularity of social media especially for participation in political discourse stemmed from the availability of innovative tools that could enable oppressed citizens to stand against tyrants and demand for accountability in governance. Twitter is a mesh pot for conversations on different issues including politics and thus an interesting platform of study because as Lorentzen (2014) explains the information on Twitter is managed by users, who can choose which actors and hashtags to follow and air their views without any censorship.

Beyond the user factor, Twitter conversations are of interest because social media are perceived as manipulated tools used to spread propaganda for selfish objectives (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Marwick & Lewis, 2018). Twitter is fast becoming one of the most popular social media platforms; Mavridis (2018) also states that social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube, offer grounds for the generation and distribution of fake news and hate speech which seems to be at the heart of the issues on polarisation particularly because people subscribe to information centred on their beliefs and see divergent views as negative and possibly an affront on them. Based on a study on social media hate speech organised by the Centre for Global Media and Communications at SOAS University of London in 2015/2016, political polarisation seems to be a much more perverse problem to solve than merely removing aggressive or hateful comments from social media. More so, these comments are inspired by environmental factors that shape the audiences views at given moments in time. Given this scenario, it is important to understand just how easily social media conversations on Twitter can become a driver for polarisation and within what contextual frames such polarisation occurs.

Objectives

This study content analysed selected conversations on recent political issues driven by media influencers on Twitter and Facebook in order to:

- (a) Identify the predominant themes in the conversations around the validity of news items under consideration
- (b) Gauge the predispositions evident in the reader's responses to the information driving the discourse
- (c) Identify the tools used by readers to respond to the discourse
- (d) Determine if the conversations are polarised.
- (e) Determine the contextual frames that sparked polarisation if visible in the conversations.

Research Questions

- (a) What were the predominant themes in the conversations around the validity of news items selected by the social media influencers?
- (b) What was the major predisposition of the reader's responses to the information driving the discourse?
- (c) What were the tools used by readers to respond to the discourse?
- (d) Were the conversations polarised?
- (e) What contextual frames sparked polarisation in the conversations?

Social Media as Drivers of Fake News and Hate Speech

Schackmuth (2018) explains that social media is a mobilising force for fake news especially thanks to some of the features that give it an advantage over traditional media. Social media platforms were instrumental in the recurrent discussion over the President Barack Obama place of birth saga till it became a global discourse. This inadvertently supports the description by Reuters (2017) that information of any sort, valid or fake can often be manipulated to cause harm or make a private discourse a public discussion. Muller and Schwarz (2018) also support this view explaining that social media has become the driver of hate speech and fake news in this century much as traditional media did in earlier centuries. They explain that it is not just pushing these two concepts but fanning the embers of what could blow over into everyday life. Citing some reports, Reeves (2017) in his report on the crisis in South Sudan supports Muller and Schwarz's (2018) view stating that online hate speech and fake news posts do not stay online but constantly overflow into the real world causing issues that cannot be rectified oftentimes. He cited the case of a man who attacked a restaurant with a gun because of posts which stated that a human trafficking ring was being run through that location.

Similarly, Reeves explains that certain features of social media make it difficult for readers or viewers to know whether it is fake or true. These features include its anonymity, the speed of dissemination even before the story can be verified, the near permanent feature of online information, amongst others. Syed (2017) supports these views as he identifies the features of social media that drives news irrespective of the truth or otherwise across boundaries and platforms to include: lack of strong information filters which allows all manner of information and news to flow across the internet thus propagating fake news and hate speech, the fact that it has communities which means that that even if only one person on that community platform knows about the fake news, it is very easy to share it with others on his or her community platform and thus continue to spread it like wildfire, the amplification which is much stronger than word of mouth and lastly the speed of information movement.

While these features as drivers of the concepts are important, CEPO (2016) identifies other human drivers of social media hate speech to include: *Children affected by or involved in violence at increasingly earlier ages due to proximity to conflict, a learning to hate and the breakdown of positive norms/values. *Youths who feel frustration, and decide to use social media offerings to further entrench hate. *Lack of accountability especially the power of anonymity and distance of the perpetrators *Political / tribal alignments - misconception on cultural diversity caused by heightened polarisation techniques of the media and manipulators and finally the lack of policies to guide online freedom of expression, ethics and privacy. These features and the effect on the concepts in discourse led to the findings of Pesonen (2018) that since even traditional media now fall prey to the elements of fake news and hate speech (ACSPN, 2018), people have lost confidence even in the ability of traditional media to stand for the truth as well as being a driver of unity as opposed to polarising the society. The issue is alarming because it seems to have become a trend for dangerous actors (especially political actors) to pull the social media strings of misinformation particularly before and during elections. Nigeria was not exempt, USA did not escape it and Kenya according to Dahir (2017) also felt the effects of the social media manipulators shortly before their elections in 2017. Almost 50% of those who were polled in Kenya stated that they had used social media to access and share news about the election. But despite their pervasive use of the platforms, respondents stated that they did not fully trust information shared on networks like Facebook and WhatsApp irrespective of the source. This indicates that social media platform strategists need to develop action plans to tackle the issue of manipulation but more importantly, the loss of believability and credibility crisis this will place on the media itself.

Tool Driving Conversations on Social Media: Memes

Foster (2014) cites Shifman (2014) who argues that the word “meme” could be used to describe a variety of contemporary behaviours. In addition, Knobel and Lankshear (2006 also cited in Foster) define memes as “widely propagated ideas or phenomena” online (p. 217). Memes now describe internet memes, or image macros, GIFs, videos, and email chains online. Given these definitions, Spencer (2017, p 6) traces the origin of memes to the work of an evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins. In her view memes describe songs, fads, catchphrases, and or images, and are “nominal cultural information units conveyed by individuals, and/or groups, through communication processes” (Dawkins 2006 cited in Spencer, 2017). These memes have now become a universally accepted tool by internet users for the spread and duplication and acceptance of digital content. Images (Memes) are generally most effective when they go viral. The viral nature of memes helps users convey opinions and ideologies which would otherwise die out if they are not spread (Rushkoff, 2010 cited in Spencer). These memes have proven capable of generating feedback from viewers, whether through comments, responses, redevelopment of new concepts or a mixture of the above.

Kulkarni (2017) explains that images capture a part of culture that spreads by the process of imitation or copying. Images particularly memes have become the form by which citizens air their views in society (Shiftman, 2013 and Nowak, 2013 cited in Kulkarni, 2017). Internet memes have become intertwined with social life and become opinion shapers. Particularly important is that memes convey information from the creator of the message to a wide network of people. Kulkarni (2017) explains that digital natives are driven to browse the news sites for detailed information based on the content of memes made on the issues. Shiftman (2013) in his book- 'Memes in Digital Culture', explains that memes are more of user generated content than standardised information generated by established media houses or elites. These user generated

memes look professional as they include videos and photos produced by professional artists. A lot of research goes into making some of this content for the purpose of ensuring it achieves the set objectives. Marwick and Lewis (2017) explain that images are intended to be transmitted by individuals on social media, because propaganda spread through interpersonal connections irrespective of the validity is more successful than that generated by the message designer itself. As such, this feature lends memes to being used by media manipulators who are bent on pushing propaganda in all forms and in places like Nigeria often negative and possibly lies. They use this social media tool to push ideologies to achieve a specific end. The danger is that these media manipulators are not exactly interested in whether or not the media becomes a part of their machinery as they are confident in the distance the coded information would travel via interpersonal connections on social media especially by individuals who have no time to confirm the veracity of the claims on the meme.

Social Media Audience Polarisations

On social media platforms all content have identical or similar appearances due to standardised templates and irrespective of the source or content creator (Schackmuth, 2018: 26). This means that an article written by Professor Wole Soyinka would fit into the same space as that from any of Linda Ikeji's sources on her blog. While not all alternative media like Linda Ikeji's blog or other blogs and news sites are fictitious, some of them operate outside the boundaries of fact. These misinformation, fake news and often times hate speech go viral once they hit any social media platform and conform to the beliefs of any group of online citizens. The result is that to a large extent and due in part to the deluge of digital information, people tend to rely more and make decisions based on the signals conveyed by others within their online communities and once there are dissenting views, they respond in negative ways. George (2017) explains that what is at stake is not just the mainstreaming of misinformation or hate speech but the fact that as sites convey the misinformation and hate, they become **purveyors of intolerance, driving ideological conversations that become a force for hate and other extremist conversations be it religious, tribal or political party inclined.**

Social media thus becomes a breeding ground for misinformation and often times extremism which leads and has led to polarisation online. The social media environment has inspired a herd mentality particularly with the emergence of social media influencers as a concept of individuals with large following in an online community. Followers often push the views of their 'influencers' on particular news items, thus leading to more shares, often times without serious thought. Nevertheless, it would be impossible to blame readers or viewers in a dispensation where fake news is visually similar to real news and all go viral into mainstream society. George (2017) attributed the polarity of views around conversations to the invasion of trolls or fiends internet users who post and broadcast offensive comments and pick fights on social media and news platforms; pointing out that they engage in hate speech as well. Many news organisations have tried to address the problem by constantly “deleting or relegating posts flagged as hate speech” and although this is a form of censorship, the practice gives readers on those sites confidence to express themselves without fear of being intimidated or silenced through a barrage of insults. It is also becoming visible that information sources used to produce meaning about critical issues and debates are drifting as well whether due to individual bias or otherwise but this has led to more extreme framing of events and topical issues, something that feeds audiences already predisposed to react strongly to types of information (SOAS, 2018).

There is mounting concern that social media sites contribute to political polarization by creating “echo chambers” which insulate people from opposing views about current events, according to

Bail, Argyle, Brown, Bumpus, Chen, Hunzaker, Lee, Mann, Merhout and Volfovsky (2018). The authors noted that the American society, from available studies, is deeply divided on controversial issues such as inequality, gun control, and immigration, and that such divisions have been established to align with political partisanship over the years. Citing Dimock and Carroll (2014) they pointed out that the partisan identities of Americans can now be used to predict their preferences 'about a range of social policy issues nearly three times as well as any other demographic factors such as education or age'. This implies that polarisation does not answer to economic or social development of a people. On the contrary, it serves as impediment to the design and implementation of social policies with even possible grave consequences for the effective functioning of democracy (Achen and Bartels, 2016, Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015). This polarisation, which has become a source of concern in the wake of increasing opportunities for airing one's views through technology-mediated communication, is traceable to 'echo chambers', as earlier noted. Echo chambers are 'patterns of information sharing that reinforce preexisting political beliefs by limiting exposure to opposing political views'.

According to McPherson, Smith-lovin and Cook (2001), Edelman and Vaisey (2014), there is growing concern that social media platforms and possibly their influencers have exacerbated political polarisation of the American society because of their homophile, or the well-documented tendency of people to form social network ties to those who are similar to themselves. This untoward development is despite the initial optimism that social media would enhance the consumption of heterogeneous sources of information about current events and it is becoming a source of concern in Nigeria as well.

Literature Review

Several studies have been conducted on the polarisation of different societies. There are studies on the polarisation of the American society within the context of its political practice (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson, 1996, Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008, Fiorina and Abrams, 2008, Prior, 2013, Iyengar and Westwood, 2015, Bakshy, Messing and Adamic, 2015, King, Schneer and White, 2017, Mason, 2018). In one of such studies, Bail, Argyle, Brown, Bumpus, Chen, Hunzaker, Lee, Mann, Merhout and Volfovsky (2018) surveyed a large sample of Democrats and Republicans who visit Twitter at least three times a week about some policy issues. One week later, the researchers randomly assigned respondents to a treatment condition in which they were offered financial incentives to follow a Twitter bot for one month that exposed them to messages from those with opposing political ideologies (e.g., elected officials, opinion leaders, media organizations, and nonprofit groups). Respondents were resurveyed at the end of the month to measure the effect of this treatment, and at regular intervals throughout the study period to monitor treatment compliance. The study found that Republicans who followed a liberal Twitter bot became substantially more conservative post-treatment while Democrats exhibited slight increases in liberal attitudes after following a conservative Twitter bot.

Tucker, Gues, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan (2018) have also undertaken a general review of existing discourse around political polarisation. They reported studies by Hetherington (2002) and Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) which indicate that elite polarisation can increase mass political polarisation, although the authors also noted that elites in contemporary society 'can also play an outsized role in the spread of polarising content, including through social media.' They reported another study by Ladd (2011) which indicated that politicians can intentionally sow distrust in established media organisations to help boost less credible, possibly social media-based sources. Other studies in the compilation by Tucker et al (2018) include those that indicated that online political discussions occur in environments that

are clearly different from the typical face-to face interaction (Ho and McLeod 2008), that there are few contextual cues about the reactions of discussion partners online (Walther 2011), some online environments offer anonymity which creates significant implications for the quality of discussion (Papacharissi 2004), in terms of types, while discussions are often public, some are semi-public or visible to many others (Wyatt et al. 2000). The authors also noted that while anonymity is possible on Twitter and Reddit, Facebook offers more user- information that could help to contextualize what is produced. They also reported a study by Adamic and Glance (2005) on political blogs which showed the existence of a high degree of polarisation in the lining patterns of liberal and conservative blogs, while another study by Conover et al.(2011) showed a high degree of strongly polarized retweet patterns within political discussions based on ideological leanings of users. Finally, they reported a recent study by Barberá et al. (2015) of retweet networks across multiple domains which showed that politically salient topics often resemble “echo chambers” with high polarisation.

Lorentzen (2014) also investigated the relationships and communication between Twitter actors in Swedish political conversations, using 77,436 tweets from 10,294 Twitter actors containing the hashtag #svpo. The study identified 916 prominent actors and categorized them according to the main political blocks, using information from their profiles while social network analysis was utilised to map the relationships and the communication between these actors. The study indicated the existence of marked dominance of the three major political blocks among the 916 prominent actors as follows: left block, centre-right block, and right-wing block. Lorentzen (2014) concluded that based on the social network analysis in the study, while polarisation exists in both followership and re-tweet networks, actors follow and re-tweet actors from other groups and more related to the current study; that the mention network did not show any signs of polarisation. Gruzd and Roy (2014) investigated political polarization in social media in Canada.

Lorentzen (2014), conducted a social network analysis of 5,918 tweets posted by 1,492 Twitter users during the 2011 Canadian Federal Election. The study found 'pockets of political polarization on Twitter' through manifest clustering effect around shared political views of supporters of the same party on the Twitter network although there was also evidence of cross-ideological discourse. The study indicated that there was no increase in the willingness or tendency 'for committed partisans to shift their allegiances as a result of their Twitter engagements', a possible validation of the argument that Twitter usage is likely to further embed partisanship during election period instead of loosening such. This tendency therefore would be a significant contribution to political polarisation. Beauchamp, Lazer, Jo, Joseph and Wang (<https://www.ssrc.org/fellowships/view/social-media-and-democracy-research-grants/grantees/beauchamp/>, retrieved 12/05/19) in their study assessed how ideology and emotion of news content affect sharing and consumption by online users, using a combination of Natural Language Processing, network, and discontinuity approaches. The study was based on the understanding that news consumption and sharing are based on a complex interactions among news sources, news content and user characteristics, particularly the tendency to consume and share news that align with the user's ideological bias while shunning the opposite. Fake news, according to the researchers, has only further complicated the user identified characteristic in the sense that it can amplify content's ideological and emotional elements without paying attention to the demands for truth and through peer-to-peer sharing amplify polarisation.

However, a study in the United Kingdom suggests that social media and internet are not the cause of polarisation, and that echo chambers may not be as dreadful as they have been thought to

be as only a small fraction of the population is said to be influenced by echo chambers (<http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2018-02-21-social-media-and-internet-not-cause-political-polarisation>, accessed 18/05/19). The study, led by Dr. Grant Blank of the Oxford Internet Institute and Dr. Elizabeth Dubois of the University of Ottawa used a random sample of adult internet users in the UK to examine people's media choices, and how much they influenced their interaction with echo chambers. The influence of six key variables: gender, income, ethnicity, age, breadth of media use and political interest, were investigated and findings reveal that 'most people use multiple media outlets and social media platforms, and rather than encouraging the use and development of echo chambers, the breadth of multimedia available actually makes it easier for people to avoid them.' Commenting on the study, Blank said: 'whatever the causes of political polarisation today, it is not social media or the internet', a statement also echoed by Dubois who noted that, 'our results show that most people are not in a political echo chamber.' This outcome has been supported by Molina-Domene (2018), citing Gabler (2016) to the effect that while polarisation is a possibility during social media conversations, current evidence is not so conclusive about its real impact on ideological division and alienation. According to Gabler (2016), as cited by Molina-Domene (2018) asides from polarity, individuals tend to gravitate towards like-minded people and form clusters with them. The present study will contribute to this thrive of global discourse with particular reference to Nigeria where the issue has not received much scholarly attention.

Theoretical Framework

Framing is often times referred to as a subset of the agenda setting theory. The former was coined by Bernard L. Shaw in 1983. Boydston, Gross, Resnik and Smith (2013) explain that framing portrays issues from one perspective to the necessary exclusion of other perspectives. To Spencer (2017), it is the process which selects and highlights some aspects of reality thus giving them greater emphasis or importance. Framing theory is related to the agenda-setting theory but focuses on the media giving an interpretation using specific words to drive meaning that enables the reader understand the issue in discourse (McCombs, 2006 cited in Spencer).

Focusing on the frames contained in memes would be important in giving the reader a perspective on what is at stake or important to the designer of the message. In Cissel's 2012 study, framing is described as "a schema of interpretation, collection of anecdotes, and stereotypes that individuals rely on to understand and respond to events" (p. 68 cited in Spencer). Based on the above definition, it can be inferred that framing also extends to social media as it is a collection of individual and group- driven content disseminated for the purpose of influencing views. Social media framing can manifest as memes, individual posts and sometimes within groups, all for the purpose of convincing others. Therefore, framing presupposes that there is an element of bias from the author of the message irrespective of the form it comes in. Because framing in social media shapes opinions and pushes ideologies far beyond geographical and cultural boundaries, it is important to consider framing with regards to how it can cause polarisation and affect relationships. The originator of the message engages his opinions to frame the message and thus give a new output or ideology that he or she wants the readers to buy into especially to give a new perspective to someone previously unknowledgeable or indecisive about the subject (Canning, 2010 also cited in Spencer, 2017). Every tweet contains a specific message, and this message can provide "understanding" to those it encounters along the way.

This is best explained by the fact that framing reveals what issues, developments, and events currently dominate public agendas (Lamerichs, Nguyen, Melguizo, Radojevic and Lange-Bohmer, 2018). Through the process of reworking social media content irrespective of the

digital format used to convey meaning, it becomes easy to identify those who are likeminded on the issue of interest and those who have opposing views on the issue. The way issues and conversations are framed whether by the social media influencers or nameless and faceless individuals can intensify the rate at which polarisation occurs given the context of the issues at play. In trying to explain the relationship between social media use, the discussions in the public sphere and how polarisations occur, Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan (2018) developed a diagram to represent the relationship.

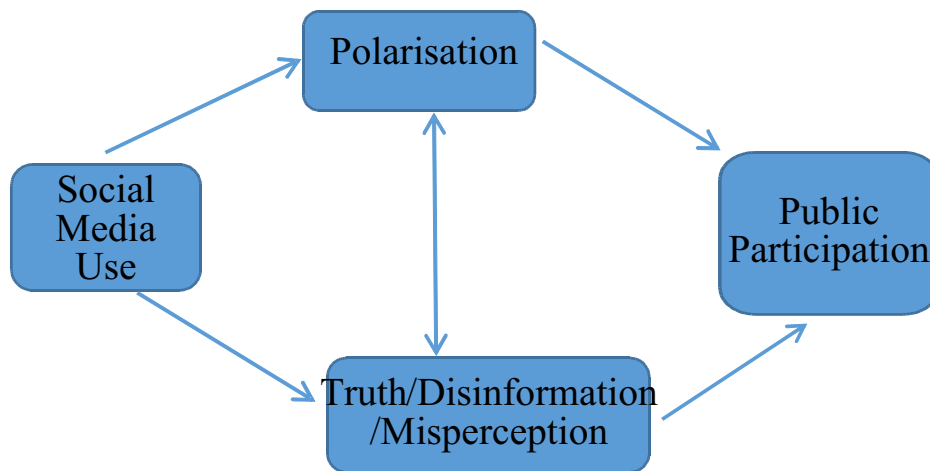


Figure 1. Social Media Polarisations and Misperception (Tucker, Guess, Barberá, Vaccari, Siegel, Sanovich, Stukal, and Nyhan, 2018 & Tweaked by Ademosu, 2018)

The diagram above indicates that there is a connection between social media use, public participation, disinformation/misconception and polarisation. Beyond the meaning conveyed by the author of the information, the public also decodes meaning from the information based on experiences and other frames of reference. The process starts when the public engages and exercises their rights to have an opinion on issues using whatever platform is handy and available to them which in this instance are social media platforms. The level and direction of the public's participation is however hinged on a number of factors one of which is the type of information they consume. Information can be factual; a form of disinformation or simply people reading personal meanings into the fact that was presented. Moreover, facts and disinformation are not exempt from people imposing their personal meanings. It is when the meanings clash with that of the social media influencer or author that polarisation often occurs.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study with particular focus on textual analysis of readers' responses to postings on two social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, to determine their polarisation tendencies. The research focused on the usage of memes and other social media tools in spreading what is considered as fake news and hate speeches and how these become agents of polarisation within the Nigerian context.

SELECTING THE INFLUENCERS

Kayode Ogundamisi was purposely selected based on social media recommendations on those who were fake news busters. According to the Punch Newspaper (2016), Kayode Ogundamisi is

an International Relations expert, TV producer, convener of the Liberty Forum, United Kingdom, and a Fellow of the German human rights group, Internationaler Menschenrechtsverein Bremen with a following of 209,000 on Twitter alone. He is also a social **commentator and a human rights activist**.

The other influencer whose posts were used was selected using the snowball effect. **Kadaria Ahmed** was selected from one of Kayode Ogundamisi's mentions also referring to the fact that she ousted some fake tweets. She is a Nigerian journalist, a media entrepreneur, and a television host who has worked across multiple platforms. She is also a social commentator and activist.

VARIABLES

In order to acquire structured results, the variables at play were coded to enable ease of analysis.

(a) The first five themes in the conversations would be purposively selected, itemised and used to categorise others

(b) Predisposition of the reader's responses to the information would be categorised as: Positive or Negative. It would be categorised as positive if they receive the post in good faith and comment along the lines of an agreement. However, it would be termed negative if they received the post with the view that the poster is trying to discredit someone or some people that they like or respect.

(c) Tools used by readers to respond to the discourse would be categorised under: Text, Visuals (gifs, memes, emoticons also referred to as emoji's and plain pictures) and any other identified tool.

(d) Determining if the conversations are polarised would be based on the conversations tending towards insulting as opposed to a simple statement: Categories would be hate speech and or neutral statements. Hate speech would be any response that viciously attacks the poster of the information or any other person that responds to him through insults instead of addressing the issue. This would be categorised as a polarised statement. A neutral statement on the other hand would be any statement that agrees or disagrees with the post without insulting either the poster or any of the responders who have different views or opinions.

(e) Determine the contextual frames that sparked polarisation if visible in the conversations: This could fall into cultural, economic, social or other contexts.

Selected stories the Influencers were trying to address

The study focused on only a few stories based on the number of responses. The stories which the influencers were trying to correct include:

1. Peter Obi's reference to him having only one wristwatch.
2. Femi Fani-Kayode's comment on Buhari not being himself but a Jubril from Sudan
3. Femi Fani-Kayode's comment that Nnamdi Kanu is being kept on a naval ship off the coast of Bayelsa by the Presidency until after the 2019 elections.
4. Fulani Killing along Markurdi-Abuja road
5. Reference to a @jacksonpbn posting a 2014 video as a 2018 video.
6. Dele Momodu's post of a fake video.
7. Kadaria Ahmed's request that Nnamdi Kanu be questioned on an article credited to Nollywood actress Kate Henshaw.

Results

(a) Themes in the conversations

Themes in the Conversations	Frequency of Occurrence	% Frequency
Enlightenment	5	3.01%
Governance/Power	8	4.82%
Validity of Information	54	32.53%
Accountability	3	1.81%
Honesty/Integrity	40	24.10%
Neutral (No recognisable themes)	56	33.73%
Total	166	100%

Source: 2018 Content Analysis of Selected Social Media Influencer Twitter Posts

From an analysis of 166 responses, the major themes covered in response to the four news items disseminated on Twitter by social media influencers were Enlightenment, Governance/Use of political power, Information Validity, Accountability, Honesty/Integrity. Of the 166 responses, 56 (33.73%) were neutral, meaning that they had no theme embedded in their responses, Validity of the Information being peddled by the social media influencers followed with 54 (32.53%) of the responses while Honesty/Integrity was covered by 40 (24.10%) of the responses followed by Governance/Power, Enlightenment and finally Accountability.

(B) Readers' predisposition/responses to selected Tweets by Kayode Ogundamisi and Kadaria Ahmed

Predisposition of Readers Responses	Frequency of Occurrence	% Frequency
Positive	16	9.64%
Negative	50	30.12%
Neutral	65	39.16%
Sarcasm	35	21.08%
Total	166	100%

Source: 2018 Content Analysis of Selected Social Media Influencer Twitter Posts

With regards to the Predisposition of readers' responses, 65 (39.16%) of the responses had neutral undertones, followed by 50 (30.12%) of the responses which had negative undertones. Sarcasm had 35 (21.08%) followed by Positive responses which had the least - 16 (9.64%). Considering that sarcastic undertones can also be viewed as negative, it meant therefore that there were 85 (51.20%) negative responses in all.

(c) Response Tools used by readers

Tools Used in Conversations	Frequency of Occurrence	% Frequency
Text	125	75.30%
Smileys	3	1.81%
Memes	10	6.02%
Pictures	3	1.81%
Combination	25	15.06%
Total	161	100%

Source: 2018 Content Analysis of Selected Social Media Influencer Twitter Posts

An assessment of the type of multimedia tools used in responding to the central tweets indicated that Text was the most used with 125 (75.30%) using that to communicate their feelings on the tweet they had read, while 25 (15.06%) responses used a combination of text and memes or pictures or smileys, followed by 10 (6.02%) which used memes to respond to the tweets and then Pictures and smileys which has 3 (1.81%) each.

(d) Polarised Nature of Conversations

Nature of Conversations	Frequency of Occurrence	% Frequency
Polarised	46	27.71%
Neutral Statements	120	72.29%
Total	166	100%

Source: 2018 Content Analysis of Selected Social Media Influencer Twitter Posts

The assessment of whether or not the responses were polarised (tilting) towards a negative bent showed that 120 (72.29%) of the responses were neutral and did not insult any of the original twitters while the polarised statements had 46 (27.71%).

(e) Contextual Frames in the Polarised Conversations

Contextual Frames	Frequency of Occurrence	% Frequency
Economic	9	5.42%
Political/Governance	17	10.24%
Health	4	2.41%
Neutral	136	81.93%
Total	166	100%

Source: 2018 Content Analysis of Selected Social Media Influencer Twitter Posts

The responses were centred on a number of frames but predominantly discussed without recourse to any of these frames. 136 (81.93%) were neutral while 17 (10.24%) of the responses were discussed within the area of politics and governance, followed by 9 (5.42%) of the responses falling under the realm of Economy and 4 (2.41%) of the responses falling under the context of health.

Discussion of Findings

Themes in the Conversations

Based on the responses, it was evident that besides from those whose responses were neutral, the bulk of the respondents were concerned with the validity of the tweets by the social media influencers. This indicated that respondents are still concerned and watchful when it comes to consuming information because they are unsure of the source or as was evident in some of the responses; they questioned the validity of the information because of the suspected affiliations or biases of the social media influencers. This is important because as explained by Wardle & Derakshan (2017) cited in Martins et al believing misinformation or fake news can cause harm. This also aligns with George's (2017) explanation that the mainstreaming of misinformation or hate speech raises the stake on truthful information and that this could lead to influencers (message originators) becoming purveyors of intolerance and drivers of ideological conversations that could provoke hate and other extremist conversations. The results therefore showed that people were wary about trusting the information provided by the original tweeter.

Reader's predisposition and responses

From the data provided, the combined negative and sarcasm responses showed that the bulk of respondents were negatively disposed towards the information they had read. While some of the readers could not believe the reality of the situation in the tweets whether it was the issue of Peter Obi claiming to have only one watch or the claim that PDP brought about Nollywood or the establishment of Channels TV or the issue of APC not having achieved anything in Ebonyi state, readers expressed their displeasure with the issue irrespective of who they supported and they did this by speaking negatively or using sarcasm both at the situation or at the originator of the tweets. Their responses also made reference to the framing of the original tweets by the message creators. Kayode Ogundamisi was on the receiving end of some of the backlash; responders made reference to the fact that he was an APC supporter. So any debunked news from the other party was deemed to be partisan a pushing of the APC agenda. Other polarised insults went to the original source of the fake news/disinformation pointed out by Kayode Ogundamisi, which is why one of them- Femi Fani-Kayode was on the receiving end of some of the insults with one responder using a “pretending to be shocked gif”. In essence, some of the responses were indirectly stating that FFK was a known twister of the truth. Kadaria Ahmed was not exempt from the story analysed under her twitter handle she was referred to as a fake journalist who peddles fake news.

Response Tools used by readers

Despite the expectation that the respondents would make great use of images especially memes which are very popular at the moment, the responses were predominantly text based while about one-fifth of the respondents used a combination of text and smileys or text and memes or text and pictures. However, they were able to express their feelings appropriately via the method chosen whether it was displeasure, disbelief or agreement with the message creator's original post.

Polarised Nature of Conversations

In view of the fact that there was concern about social media posts causing polarisation amongst readers and spilling over into real life, it was interesting to discover that only one quarter of the total responses were polarised. Despite the fact that it was less than half, it is still an alarming state when one in every four responses is polarised. This increases the tendency of others to join the conversation from the same standpoint. The polarity was more common when the issue of Peter Obi came up with regards to his single wristwatch. It could be inferred that some of this springs from the economic link of the issue and especially the audiences viewing the content. The economic challenges and the belief that indeed Peter Obi could not be telling the truth affected the tone of their response and was possibly the frame of reference affecting their verbal responses to the situation. Responses from the audiences tended to throw up the political affiliation and biases of the message originators and favourable responders.

Contextual Frames in the Polarised Conversations

Surprisingly, the responses to the original tweets were mainly discussed neutrally with no recourse to any macro issue but what was stated in the original tweet. However, for those whose responses had a macro element embedded Politics and Governance were the main context used to reference their response to the message creator or other readers. The other main contexts referenced included Economy and Health which are issues affecting all members of society. With regards to the originators of the messages though, they simply posted the messages online. Albeit, their previous inclinations gave off the impression that they had intentionally framed the messages to discredit the subject and persuade people to their way of thinking.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

From the study, social media has become the new public sphere for getting more political participation especially to discuss the main issues in society. However, as with the physical space, ideologies still come to play in the digital space. And this in itself can lead to polarised conversations which can affect relationships and eventually becloud the fact that beyond political affiliations and ideologies, the issues affect us all as human beings and as citizens whether in the digital space or the physical. From the instances where readers called out the biases of the message originators, it is evident that social media influencers need to be careful with what they post and how they post it. Each message reflects their ideologies, and they can cause conflict if their messages are wrongly framed.

It is recommended that a much wider study be carried out on more social media influencers and their posts to observe and ascertain the specific factors that push readers to respond in different ways especially expressing polarised views. It would also have more traction if the study covers more than one social media platform.

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