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NAVIGATING NIGERIA'S NATIONHOOD CRISIS IN A HATE-DRIVEN DIGITAL MEDIA SPACE

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Abstract:

Digital media has transformed various aspects of human life, including communication and societal dynamics. In developing countries like Nigeria, the younger generation, particularly youths, has embraced digital media, often competing in its usage. While digital media has facilitated significant positive advancements, it has also exacerbated negative phenomena, notably the rise of hate speech. This conceptual study, titled Navigating Nigeria's Nationhood Crisis in a Hate-Driven Digital Media Space, examines the prevalence of hate speech in Nigeria's digital media landscape. The study identifies contributing factors such as the advent of digital technology, widespread social media usage, activities of citizen journalists, ethnic consciousness, secessionist agitations, hero worship, poor leadership, nepotism, corruption, and political discontent. The unregulated and often irresponsible use of portable digital devices has enabled individuals to express themselves without regard for human dignity, decency, or societal harmony. To address this growing issue, the study recommends fostering a culture of self-accountability, self-monitoring, and self-regulation among users. Encouraging individuals to act as their own gatekeepers can help mitigate hate speech, promoting a healthier digital environment and fostering true nationhood in Nigeria.

Keywords: Digital Media, Hate Speech, Nigeria, Nationhood, Social Media, Self-Regulation

Introduction

The inception of digital media has brought about enhanced communication across the globe. Most Nigerian youths have since begun to employ digital media technologies in their day-to-day activities. They use the media space to air their views and stay in touch with their classmates and

colleagues, family and friends, socialites and society. They also comment on current and trending issues, developments, and happenstances in offline and online communities. Most of these digital divas and doyens first resort to digital media for any information on existing or emerging issue(s). Going by the fact that the success of any modern democratic society entails the active participation of the majority of the citizenry; media (conventional and digital) should among other things keep the citizens engaged in the business of good governance by sensitizing, informing, educating and mobilizing the citizenry. Regrettably, these days, media especially digital media have become tools in the hands of certain members of society whose preoccupation is to sow the seed of discord between and among friends, personalities, groups, tribes and tongues. Sometimes, this seed of discord which often appears in the form of hate-speech is sown along political party, religious, economic, social, tribal, and professional lines. This has frequently resulted in divisive tendencies instead of cohesive and concerted efforts towards nation-building. As a result, digital media contributes to citizens' cynicism and democratic decay. Still, in many fledgling democracies, digital media has asserted its role in bolstering, deepening and sustaining democratic structure and institutions.This study design is conceptual, with three objectives to help identify the means of navigating Nigeria's nationhood crisis in a hate-infested digital media space.

Statement of the problem

The challenge of nation-building is not only multi-dimensional but also hydra-headed, especially in a pluralistic, multi-ethnic and developing country like Nigeria. Oftentimes, several factors are alleged to be responsible for it. These factors make the journey towards nationhood an uphill and snail-paced movement.

Since the inception of digital media, many individuals have joined the digital bandwagon including Nigerians. Digital media offers among other things the ability to send and receive content quickly and seamlessly; the opportunity to relate with friends and family across the globe, enhancement of ease of doing business, connectivity with the global community without physically leaving a particular location, access to unpredictable quantum of information at the click of a button and shrinkage of the global space and time. Nonetheless, as it is with every new development or innovation, abuse and misuse are usually inevitable. As noted by Ukwueze and Uche (2015), digital media havebecome burdened with the posting of different and diverse messages. According to the duo, some communication experts, analysts, and media watchers have described some of these digital posts, tags and tweets as nothing short of hate speech, especially about politics, politicking and the political media-sphere.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to identify the factors that militate against nation-building and the effect of digital media hate speech on Nigeria’s quest for nationhood. The specific objectives include:

- To find out the reasons for the upsurge of hate speech in Nigeria.
- To identify some of the effects of hate speech on nation-building.

- To recommend the steps to take to ensure true nationhood.

Review of Literature

The concept of digital media

The rapid adoption and use of digital technologies by different nations of the world including Nigeria is quite phenomenal (Ukwueze& Uche, 2015). Hoggatt in Ukwueze and Uche (2015) notes that digital technology provides interactivity, non-linear communication and a new economy in the mediums it brings forth. As digital technology influences mass media, it also carries cultural implications. Uche, Nwabudike and Anho (2017) aver that the traditional tripod media of mass communication: newspapers, television and radio alongside their media colleagues such as magazines, books and journals are no longer the media superpowers as the walls of partition between the traditional media and new media are becoming thinner, collapsing and fast fading away; thus, ushering in a new dawn in the media world.

Uche et al. (2017) note that traditional media practitioners themselves have also undergone tremendous changes owing to the impact of digital technology. The trio posit further that television, radio, newspapers and magazines are no longer the exclusive platforms for relaying news as social networks have entered the scene and as it were, getting and gaining their fair share of the media patronage thus liberalizing the communication landscape and also creating more challenges especially for the journalism professionals.

New media are often described as digital media. A lot of young people were hitherto the major users but new media use has gone beyond youthful enterprise. The new media gave rise to blogs or weblogs which are web pages with links regularly updated; wikis which are web pages that are easily editable even by non-programmers; podcasts which are digital radio productions distributed via the internet and digital videos which serve as outlets for self-expression. These days, aside from Facebook and YouTube, we have other digital media platforms including Instagram, LinkedIn, X (Twitter), TikTok, etc.

Digital media have opened the public space and sphere. The clamour for self-determination, occupation of political offices and desire for a share in the national cake has been enmeshed in speeches which are indeed nothing short of hate speech. Several ethnic champions and verbal heroes have been unveiled via the digital media with supporters and sympathizers toeing their line and language.

The concept of hate-speech

Speech is a means of verbal communication. It is the means of sharing ideas and mutual influence. However important speech is to humans, there are occasions when it tends to become negative, unwanted and unwelcomed. That occasion is when it is hate speech.

The United Nations describes hate speech as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language regarding a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or another identity factor (United Nations, 2019, p. 2). Hate speech promotes tribal and racial hatred which is deep-rooted in isolationism.

To Neisser (2014), hate speech refers to all communications: verbal, written, or symbolic that insult a racial, ethnic and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcome for any other reasons. Yakubu (2019) posits that is essentially, prejudicial discrimination against another individual on grounds of dissimilarities and that within this context, hate speech depicts the incessant discrimination that further underscores the uneasy relationship between different groups in Nigeria. Odorige (2017) posits that in a multicultural, multi-ethnic and diverse religious country like Nigeria, inflammatory statements could lead to ethnic and religious clashes if not contained because of their sensitive nature.

Brown (2017) attributes the genesis of hate speech to the late 1980s in response to what some scholars in the US witnessed in the legal system while tackling certain forms of racist speech. Matsuda (1989) also used the term hate speech in her article "Public Response to racist speech: considering the Victory's History" in her bid to expose and highlight how the legal system of the United States failed to provide adequate means to seeking redress for the victims of harmful racist speech. Hate speech entails attacking an individual or group of individuals based on gender, age, race, religion or status. Odorige (2017) describes hate speech as an agent provocateur and precursor to insecurity anywhere in the world. By that, he means that hate speech is a secret agent who incites people to do illegal and unlawful acts that fuel and feed insecurity. Popoola and Adegoke (2015) see hate speech as a form of political rivalry just as vituperations, abusive language, calumny and aggressive opposition. Hate speech is also described as only a symptom, a manifestation of intolerance and narrow-mindedness deeply rooted in society (Pálmadóttir&Kalenikova, n.d.).

Bojarska in Abdullahi (2020) defines it as an expression towards individuals or social groups in a way that is hostile and based on their membership of a particular race, ethnic group, nation or even based on disability, religion, gender or sexual orientation. Selma (2019) attributes all messages in the public space that are directed to either individuals or groups with certain characteristics including much emphasis on the tone of expression to cause harm, as hate speech. The Committee of Ministers, Council for Europe in their recommendation describes hate speech as that, which covers all forms of expression that spread, promote, justify or incite racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-semantic and any other forms of hatred that are based on intolerance, including expression through aggressive nationalism, discrimination, ethnocentrism and hostility against minorities, people of origin by immigration and also migrants (Pálmadóttir&Kalenikova, n.d.).

The concept of nation-building

Nation-building in this paper is the same as national development. The need for nation-building is attributed to the multi-ethnic and heterogeneous nature of the Nigerian state which incidentally, is the same as in most African states. Right from the Independence period, the need for proper national integration and development became a priority and thus, dominated all policy dialogues and discourses.

National development could be said to mean the sustainable growth and development of a nation. It could be described as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a country or nation. And national development is best achieved through development planning, which can be described as the country's collection of strategies mapped out by the government (Oloyede, 2019).

National development is the holistic, all-embracing development of a nation. It, therefore, cuts across cultural, social, political, economic, material and scientific aspects of a nation. Elugbe (1994) in Oloyede (2019) posits that national development refers to the growth of the nation in terms of unity, education, economic well-being and mass participation in government.

Objectives of national development

Todaro and Smith (2003) in Anaeto and Anaeto (2010) articulated three objectives of national development:

- Increase availability and widen the distribution of basic life-sustaining goods such as food, shelter, health and protection.
- To raise levels of living in addition to higher incomes, the provision of more jobs, better education, and greater attention to cultural and human values, all of which will serve not only to enhance material well-being but also to generate greater individual and national self-esteem.
- To expand the range of economic and social choices available to individuals and nations by freeing them from servitude and dependence, not only on other people and nation-states but also on the forces of ignorance and human misery.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two theories, namely: Technology Determinism Theory and Technology Acceptance Model. Technology determinism was propounded by Marshall McLuhan and the theory posits that media technology shapes how we as individuals in human society think, feel, act and how society operates as we move from one technological age to another (McLuhan, 1962). The theory describes how technology influences human evolution: how who we are is determined by the tools we invent and use. The theory believes that technology is an autonomous force that changes society (Ndolo, Udeze&Anikpo, 2015). According to technology determinists, man is seen as a helpless being in the arms of technology. That is to say, human beings are conditioned by technology with no say and no choice but to dance to the dictates of technology just as the

pendulum does (Leonard, 2008;Holvast, Duquenoy, & Whitehouse, 2005). This position is not absolute as humans and their actions are products of choice and unrelenting decision-making.

The second theory for this work is the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) which hinges on the introduction of two variables that mainly affect the acceptance of any new technology or innovation. The variables are perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness refers to the potential consumer's subjective belief that using a particular system would enhance his or her job performance in an organizational context, in other words, the Technology acceptance model (TAM) describes perceived usefulness in the context to which a system adds to a user's job performance (Davis, Bagozzi&Warshaw 1989; Davis, 1989).Umrani and Ghadially (2008) describe technology acceptance as the approval, favourable and ongoing use of newly introduced devices and systems. Even though digital media have been accepted and constantly patronized by digital natives as well as immigrants (Prensky, 2001), the purpose for their deployment are matters of concern; hence, the need for this study.

Reasons for the upsurge in hate speech

The inception of digital technology: the inception of digital technologies otherwise called new media technologies has brought unprecedented development (both positive and negative) to humanity. Yakubu (2019) posits that the digital revolution accorded ill-minded individuals the medium to spread hate speech and other related vices with just the click of a button or tap on a screen. He posits further that the challenges of hate speech in Nigeria are compounded by two factors which he refers to as the twin incidence of modern democracy and the digital revolution in ICT.

The digital space is so accommodating, un-discriminatory, unbiased and unhindered in the discharge of assigned duties. As a result, several individuals can use these technologies in ways that are detrimental to corporate existence and drive towards nationhood. Little wonder many studies have noted that hate speech is one of the unprecedented negative effects of new media technologies (Yahaya, 2019; Uche et al., 2017a; Uche et al., 2017b; Ukwueze& Uche, 2015).

The ubiquity of social media networks: the widespread of hate speech is also attributed to the nature of social media networks which are available on a global scale across different applications and devices, namely: smartphones, laptops, desktops, and iPads, among others. These devices with an internet connection can be deployed for anything either good or bad. According to Abdullahi (2020), hate speech has become rampant these days as a result of advancements in technology and several social media networks where people express their views freely not minding whether or not such views are harmful to others. He further posits that hate speech has become a way of expressing our thoughts in our modern state claiming that it is our right as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Activities of citizen journalists: several individuals, young and old have turned and transformed themselves into active users and producers of content in an online environment. This has led to abuse and misuse of the online space. Hate speech is one such misuse and abuse of the internet space. Due to the non-observance of media ethics and laws, these untrained individuals now post whatever they fancy in the guise of freedom of expression.

Renaissance of ethnic consciousness: of recent, there has been a resurgence of ethnic consciousness. This has been attributed to the style, body language, pronouncements and appointments by the nation's leadership which seem to favour certain individuals from a particular section of the country to the chagrin of other sections. This is also underscored by Yakubu's (2019) postulation that the major cause of hate speech is affiliation with primordial ethnic identity.

Secessionists' agitation and uprising: in the Nigeria of today, several individuals have risen as secessionists to agitate and clamour for separation from the Federal Republic of Nigeria as an independent state. This agitation has led to several arrests. What, however, remains constant is the rate at which hate speech is used on the others; the present leadership and other federating units.

Hero worship:the agitation for self-defence, political recognition, separation and independence has led to the emergence of tribal heroes and messiahs. These hitherto unknown personalities have suddenly become widely acclaimed and loom large over their own people groups and tribes on account of championing their cause. These individuals, though self-appointed and self-projecting have become heroes and Moses' of their particular tribe and clime this time with a countless number of individuals following, worshipping, and often deifying them. These tribal heroes and messiahs can use any language much of which is not short of hate speech in their unmitigated narratives. The likes of Nnamdi Kanu and Sunday Adeyemo (also known as Sunday Igboho) are still fresh in our national consciousness. The formeraddresses the Federal Republic of Nigeria as a zoo with a "paedophile" as the head while the citizens are referred to as people in the zoo.

Bad leadership: when leadership is questionable and seems to be unconcerned, insensitive and autocratic, hate speech is usually the result among other negative implications. A decision that is seen by the generality of the populace to be anti-people will result in hate speech against those in power by the people. For instance, Nigerians on 5th June 2021 witnessed an unprecedented ban on the microblogging site, X (Twitter) by the President Buhari-led administration. This ban was said to have been premised on the preponderance of fake news and misinformation via the social media platform. Most Nigerians, however, saw the action as a backlash on President Buhari's hate speech via his Twitter handle that he would deal with the Southeasterners in the language they understand. Several Nigerians especially the Igbos saw this as a reference to the genocidal phenomenon that happened during the Nigeria-Biafra war between 1967—1970 in which it was alleged that about two million Southeasterners died. Aside from Nigerians who saw the expression as hate speech, Twitter also saw it in that light hence, it brought down the tweet which led to the Ban of Twitter in Nigeria. Not too long later, the president also described the Igbos as not more than a dot in a circle. This was also interpreted by many as hate speech.

Nepotism and favouritism: when political, religious and socio-cultural appointments are done on the basis of favouritism and not on merit, responses and reactions are often codified in hate speech. This has often been the case, especially with the current leadership as many citizens allege that it favours people from a particular tribe and region to the detriment of the federal character and spirit of brotherhood in nationhood.

Corruption: corruption and corrupt practices are often greeted with hate speech against the perceived perpetrators and their collaborators. A closer look at the comment section of any online report or post that borders on corruption has always seen social media users posting nothing less

than hate speech sometimes to even the government or the leadership of the anti-corruption agencies and officials while some others vilify the accused. The irony is that hate speech itself is a corrupt practice since it is not an acceptable act.

Discontentment: hate speech is also caused by discontentment. When citizens are discontented, they are prone to the use of abusive language. The present security challenges in the country such as armed robbery, kidnapping, banditry, ritual murder, yahoo-plus, unknown gunmen, Boko Haram, militants and killer herdsmen and hyperinflation have led to general discontentment. Hate speech is used by the led against those in power while those in power also use hate speech against the followers and even against themselves and opposition parties and groups.

Politics: many studies have shown that hate speech is usually rife during periods of electioneering campaigns and among most political gladiators. Uche and Ukwueze (2015) submit that before the Nigerian General Elections, the citizens including local and international election observers are often concerned about the level of hate speech that usually marks political adverts and campaign messages which often results in palpable fear and apprehension that places the country on the edge of a precipice. Some other researchers have also situated the upsurge period to pre and post-elections (national and local) in Nigeria (Abdullahi, 2020; Yahaya, 2019; Odorige, 2017).

These activities within and without the digital space often constitute a clog in the wheel of progress towards nationhood. It should, however, be noted that the above issues highlighted as the reasons for the upsurge of hate speech are not mutually exclusive. They are interrelated and interconnected; hence, their hydra-headedness and by extension, the imbroglio.

Conclusion

Ethnicity, nepotism, favouritism, prejudice, religious sentiments, corruption, bad leadership, secessionist tendencies, tribal heroism, discontentment, the ubiquity of social media networks, citizen journalism, and politics have continued to be the precursors of hate speech in Nigeria.

Hate speech no matter the source is not a welcomed development irrespective of the cause or condition, form or format. Admittedly, the incidence of hate speech in Nigeria has variously been attributed to high-profile individuals especially those occupying the nation's political space: political office holders and those seeking to be so elected (Ukwueze& Uche, 2015; Odorige, 2017). Digital media and the activities of social media users cannot also be the reason to condone hate speech. Agitations, discontentment, corruption cases and charges, leadership and ethnic consciousness are no reasons for the admittance and usage of hate speech for and against any individual, group, or nation. As Nigeria is still grappling with the challenge of nation-building, all hands must be on deck to make this quest for nationhood a reality in our time and clime.

Recommendations

- Digital media should not be seen as a hate speech platform.

- ❖ All digital media users should become self-accounting, self-monitoring and self-gatekeeping to help at least mitigate the incidence of hate speech in Nigeria for the betterment of all.
- ❖ The search for true nationhood is a collective responsibility; hence, no one should feel unconcerned and unperturbed.
- ❖ In the interest of nationhood, those saddled with the leadership of the country should adopt a high sense of responsibility, sensitivity and sensibility knowing that those they are called to serve are rational beings.
- ❖ The principle of federal character should guide the appointment into various offices, especially at the national level.

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