HATE SPEECH IN ONLINE READERS' COMMENTS DURING 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: ISSUES, CAUSES AND PROFFERED SOLUTIONS

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Abstract

Hate speech is among the most significant communication issues that preoccupies the agenda of relevant governmental agencies and media analysts in contemporary Nigeria. It is an unfortunate phenomenon that manifests in the public sphere, and is fast threatening the fragile democratic dispensation in the country. The manifestation of this hate speech is evident in the just concluded general elections which the country is still struggling to make stronger sense out of its winner, President Mohammad Buhari. It is against this backdrop, that this paper discusses the nature of readers' comments in online news sites in the country's daily Newspapers, their place within the context of hate speech rhetoric, and proffer solutions to general elections in the country. Hinged on the Social Responsibility Theory, this paper employ qualitative content analytical methods from secondary Library data to investigate the causes of hate speech in online readers' comments. Overall findings reveal that, the trend of discussions is disturbing, as commenters of hate language, verbal assault, name calling, insults and derogatory words to describe subjects. To this end, the paper recommends that readers need to exhibit a high sense of responsibility in the course of interaction on the online comments platforms. Where such responsibility is not self-enforced by commenters, news platforms should remove comments that contain venomous and disparaging hate language in the interest of national unity, democracy and development of the Country, Nigeria.

Keywords: hate speech, online news, disparaging comments, venomous utterances, democracy, readers' comments, social responsibility

Introduction

Hate speech has been one of the biggest hindrances in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. The rate at which it is being perpetuated by key actors in the political scene is

alarming, and its effects diffuse into the entire political system, making it capable of jeopardizing the struggle to consolidate the fragile democracy in the country. Today, most media houses in the country have condescended so low, and have given into the temptation of carrying messages that contain hate and dangerous speech, against the codes of conduct that guide journalism practice in the country (Ibrahim, Pate, Pereira, Ya'u, Agbanyin & Bagu, 2017).

According to Suntai and Targema (2017) unlimited freedom new media offers makes it possible for every person, armed with the appropriate technology to disseminate uncensored content to the public. This is due largely to the fact that the new media is a free-for-all terrain, a loose journalism endeavor with little or no regulation and monitoring mechanisms. The popularity, degree of acceptance and access to the new media is unparalleled by any other medium, and with the recent convergence of the other mainstream media of communication on the new media, it has assumed the status of the melting point of media platforms, thereby, giving a strong voice to online readers.

Hate speech on the new media platform, therefore, is a phenomenon that has far reaching effect in a society where a vast number of citizens are active users of its various platforms. Readers comments sections of news sites have not helped matters in this respect too. Interactivity, a feature which is associated with them facilitates the spread of hate speech in the country, where commenters on news stories engage in the dissemination of hate speech and injurious statements. This has increased the enormity of the question regarding the new media and hate speech.

According to Olusola (2018) hate speeches often heightens and crystalizes during election periods, contributing to violence and hampering political reconciliation after the vote. As a federation of about 180 million people, over 250 ethnic groups, religious and social diversity coupled with a political system characterized for hate speech to fester. General elections in Nigeria have always been accompanied by hate speeches even after the return to civilian rule in 1999 that ended fifteen years of military dictatorship (International Crisis Group, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The new media technologies have facilitated interactivity and enhanced participation of citizens in the discussion of issues at the local, national and international levels. This portends a lot for democracy, a system of government that thrives on the principles of popular participation and diversity of views and opinions in the public sphere. It is expected that the potentials of the various platforms that the technologies comprise of be tapped effectively in the interest of accountability that would help to entrench democratic ethos, as indeed, evidence has shown over the years in the usage of the platforms to report issues such as elections and conflicts in the country.

However, the new media platforms generally are prone to abuse, and often times, the gravity of such abuses are enormous to the extent that they could undermine the

frantic efforts towards consolidating the country's fragile democracy. Readers' comments platforms are typical examples of how the new media technologies facilitate and at the same time complicate the struggle to consolidate democracy in the county. They are, at the moment, largely unregulated, with the tendency of facilitating reactions and interactions among commenters on online news platforms.

At the same time, they facilitate the rapid spread of hate speech and verbal combat among commenters. These have thrived for years unchecked in the country. How well this has augured with the herculean task of democratic consolidation is a subject of serious research, hence this current paper seeks to investigate the issues, nature and target of online comments, and what the pattern of interaction on the platforms portend for general elections in the country.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this paper is to examine the issues, causes and proffer solutions to hate speeches on online readers' comments in the 2019 general elections. However, as a guiding step, the paper discusses the issues concerning hate speech in online readers' comments. The paper tries to establish the possible causes of hate speeches among online readers on online news. Finally, the paper proffer possible solutions into solving the issues of hate speeches in general and specifically in Nigeria general elections.

Literature Review

Hate Speech

Hate speech is a statement intended to demean and brutalize another or the use of cruel and derogatory language on the basis of real or alleged membership in a social group. Hate speech is speech that attacks a person or a group on the basis of protected attributes such as race, religion, ethnic origin, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity.

There has been much debate over freedom of speech, hate speech and hate speech legislation. The laws of some countries describe hate speech as speech, gestures, conduct, writing, or displays that incite violence or prejudicial actions against a group or individuals on the basis of their membership in the group, or which disparage or intimidate a group or individuals on the basis of their membership in the group. The law may identify a group based on certain characteristics. In some countries, hate speech is not a legal term. Additionally in some countries, including the United States, hate speech is constitutionally protected. In some countries, a victim of hate speech may seek redress under civil law, criminal law, or both.

A website that contains hate speech (online hate speech) may be called a hate site. Many of these sites contain internet forums and news briefs that emphasize a particular viewpoint.

Overview of General Elections in Nigeria

General elections in Nigeria are forms of choosing representatives to the Nigerian federal government and various states in the fourth republic Nigeria. Nigerians elects on the federal level a head of state (the president of Nigeria) and a legislature (the National Assembly). The president is elected by the people. The National Assembly has two chambers. The House of Representatives has 360 members, elected for a four-year term in single-seat constituencies. The Senate has 109 members, elected for a four-year term: each of the 36 states are divided into 3 senatorial districts, each of which is represented by one senator; the Federal Capacity Territory is represented by only one senator.

Nigeria has a multi-party system, with two or three strong parties and a third party that is electorally successful. However, members of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) had controlled the presidency since elections were resumed in 1999 until 2015 when Muhammadu Buhari won the presidential election.

2019 General Elections in Nigeria

Presidential and National Assembly Elections were scheduled for 16th of February 2019, while State and Local government elections were scheduled for 2nd of March 2019. Elections were postponed by one week after Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) cited logistics challenges. The rescheduled dates were 23rd of February and 9th of March 2019.

President Muhammadu Buhari was re-elected for another four-year term. The primary contender was former vice president, Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). Kingsley Moghalu of the Young Progressive Party (YPP), Yele Sowore of the African Action Congress (AAC) and Fela Durotoye of the Alliance for a New Nigeria (ANN) were other popular candidates who were all relatively young. Late last year these three parties alongside some others attempted to form a coalition. However, the candidates pulled out of the coalition and decided to continue running on their respective platforms. There are 73 candidates contesting in the presidential election.

The 2019 governorship and state house of assembly elections was earlier scheduled for 2nd of March 2019 was rescheduled for Saturday 9th of March 2019. With the major political parties; All Progressives Congress (APC) and People's Democratic Party (PDP) fielding candidates in the elections across various states except Rivers State where a court order prohibits the All Progressive Congress from fielding candidates as a result of internal crises with the state chapter of the party.

Convergence of Technology on Politics and its Implications

Information technology tools like big data are being used to gather information about individuals in our country for the benefit of the political parties so they can determine the best approach to get your votes. Email is being used by all political parties to ask for

donations. Websites are used to display candidate views and take electronic donations to candidate election teams.

Text messages are being used to ask donations, and to provide a means for instantaneous polling of ideas and questions. Although television and radio have always been the most used source for political races in the country, it seems now the internet is becoming the primary medium for the rest of the world, especially for those countries where freedom of expression and a free press are not guaranteed by the constitution. There is much power for those in control of our technology. Hoping that technology will continue to be used in the cause of freedom, and not oppression, and that the ability to instantly communicate and share ideas around the globe will continue to be a source for the expansion of freedom and peace.

Relationship between readers' comment, hate speeches and elections in Nigeria

Readers' comment as a concept is a phenomenon made possible by recent developments and improvements on the technology of communication. Information and communication technologies have made it easy for the audience to reply instantly to messages that are disseminated on news sites, a trend that has been in vogue in developed nations since the turn of the 21st century, and recently spread to developing nations as well. According to Everett (2011, 108) observes prevalence of this trend when he notes that "the growing presence of technology lets consumers connect with newspapers in a way not previously possible. Newspapers' websites often allow users to comment on any article or repost it via social networks."

Today, national daily newspapers in Nigeria such as *The Punch, This Day, Daily Trust, Vanguard News, The Nation, Daily Independence,* and *Tribune* among a host of others have conspicuous online presence, the majority of which allow readers to leave comments under the stories they publish on their websites. Similarly, broadcast media stations in the country Such as the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), African Independent Television (AIT), Channels Television, Sliver Bird, and TV Continental (TVC) etc, also have online websites with the same feature. Online-based news sites such as *Premium Times, Sahara Reporters, Naija.com,* and *Daily Post* among a myriad of others also allow readers to actively participate in the content they share through the comment section. To this end, the practice of readers' comments has become a key feature of mass-mediated communication in Nigeria.

Hate speech has assumed the status of a national concern in contemporary Nigeria. Infact, many Nigerians were stunned at the sight of the banner headline in *Guardian Nigeria,* one of the leading national daily newspapers in the country on 1 March 2018, which reads "Hate speech offenders to die by hanging in Senate's new bill." The bill which seeks to establish the Independent Commission for Hate Speech that will enforce hate speech laws across the country and ensure the elimination of the menace among

other responsibilities (*Guardian Nigeria*, March 1, 2018) serves to justify the worrisome status which hate speech has assumed in the country recently.

Omilusi (2017) describes hate speech as words of incitement and hatred against individuals based upon their identification with a certain social or demographic group. Stressing further, he notes that it may include, but is not limited to "speech that advocates, threatens, or encourages violent acts against a particular group, or expressions that foster a climate of prejudice and intolerance, which can lead to targeted attacks or persecution of that group….(p.163)." Cohen-Amalgor (2011) as cited in Omilusi (2017) offers an extensive definition of hate speech, thus,

> Hate speech is defined as bias-motivated, hostile, malicious speech aimed at a person or a group of people because of some of their actual or perceived in hate characteristics. It expresses discriminatory, intimidating, disapproving, antagonistic, and/or prejudicial attitudes towards those characteristics, which include gender, race, religion, ethnicity, color, national origin, disability or sexual orientate on. Hate speech is intended to injure, dehumanize, harass, intimidate, debase, degrade and victimize the targeted groups, and to foment insensitivity and brutality against them (p.165).

Hate speech is on the rise in Nigeria, and finds expressions in two major factors that nurture and sustain its continuous existence, namely politics and ethno-religious conûicts. Ethno-religious conûicts have become so pervasive, most of which are politically motivated as posited by Orounye (2012). The outcome of most of them is wide-scale violence that often results in scores of deaths, destruction of lives and property worth millions of naira, intimidation and displacements of residents etc. Outbreaks of these conûicts often open the window for dissemination of injurious, hate, dangerous and vituperative speeches that have the capacity of accelerating the conûicts. Readers' comments present the avenues where such hate is openly expressed when issues of serious national concern are open for discussion in the public sphere, and demonize those with contrary views. According to Dauda, Abubakar and Lawan (2017), who investigate the pattern of interaction of commentators on the *Boko Haram* insurgency in Nigeria decry the prevalence of hate speech on the platform, in their words:

> It is also worrying that the discourse use abusive and derogatory terms… the magnitude and the impact of the ubiquitously vituperative and vitriolic comments in some of the discourses of the Boko Haram insurgency observed can further escalate conûicts and create more 'monsters'. This conclusion is drawn within the conclusion that Nigeria is already overwhelmed with several challenges and does not need the spread of venomous ideologies to further aggravate her situation (p. 267).

The story at the political front is not different from this. Readers' comments provide the opportunity for readers to contribute to discussions on political matters. This opportunity is a unique one and benefits the practice of participatory democracy immensely. However,

a careful observation reveals a pattern that is not only worrisome, but capable of overheating the political space, and by extension, the entire polity. According to Jibril and Targema (2017), who examine the nature of online readers' comments in Nigeria vis-à-vis the national unity question, with reference to how readers reacted to President Muhammadu Buhari's maiden media chat, held on 30 December 2015, there was an alarming prevalence of negative and injurious comments that qualify as hate speech. They conclude, based on the findings, that:

> ...the way readers were polarized along regional lines in their comments, posting negative and injurious comments, has the capability of reducing the platform into a chaotic and indiscreet battle field where readers engage in war of words, which portends nothing good for the unity of the country. This can consequently affect more, the already epileptic unity of the country. Given the nature of the readers' comments that the presidential media chat received on the online news sites, this paper submits that the platform has the potentials of intensifying the divides that characterize the Nigerian state. The realization of the much-desired unity in diversity in the country via this platform is not only far from reality, but also signals a cataclysmic danger to peaceful coexistence (p.190).

During general elections, politicians, religious figures, public officers citizens, ethnic jingoists deployed hate speech throughout the electoral cycle. Using traditional and social media, contenders deployed derogatory words and terms in local dialects to label and demand opponents. Also problematic is that ownership of Nigerian media is highly concentrated in the hands of elites who sometimes use it to promote hate messages against opposition. For instance, the African Independent Television (AIT) and a group of radio stations, which are owned by prominent member of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) and Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN), which is owned by the federal government and controlled by members of the ruling party, have been used to propagate hate speech during election periods. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC), although empowered by the federal government to enforce punishment for hate speech offenses, find it difficult to impose sanctions due to the wide attention gained from the hate messages against the opposition. In this guise, the major contention of the paper is that proffer solutions can only be attained if the masses eschew the spread of hate speech on the media space and readers' comments sections of news sites to enable them meaningfully discuss political issues in the country. How well this is done is the main motivation for the paper.

Theoretical Framework

This paper was hinged on the social responsibility theory.

Social Responsibility Theory

The very nature of social responsibility theory suggests that it is most suitable for explaining the operational mode of journalists working with the traditional or mainstream media, and how the media operate within a given socio-political setting. From this

background, the theory falls short in addressing issues which the new media and its concomitant communication avenues have raised in recent times. However, this paper overlooks this inclination and explores the tenets of the theory that connects to the question of media practitioners (whether on the mainstream or new media), evolving a decent communication culture that benefits society amidst unlimited freedom of operation.

Social responsibility theory draws the attention of journalists (and by extension, the audience to whom technology has conferred the status of content creators) to the fact that they have freedom attached with the responsibility to the society (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009; Suntai & Targema, 2017). According to Bitner (1989), the theory originates from the United States of America. By the turn of the twentieth century, the printed press had been through the era of yellow journalism (a kind of journalism characterized by reckless reporting and unethical practice). Prior to this era, the press, through the efforts of freedom fighters such as John Milton, John Erskine, Thomas Jefferson and John Stuart Mill attained some considerable degree of freedom to operate without restrictions (formal/ informal, constitutional or otherwise) in place (Sambe, 2008). In addition, the theory asserts that media must be free of government domineering and dictates, but at same time the media must be responsible to the society which they serve. In essence, this professional stewardship entails that the media must keep with the objective and professional standards of truth, objectivity, accuracy, and balance in order not to further escalate the crisis situation and an already heated polity but rather inject in their reports diverse opinions, proffered solutions address the issue at hand to nail the crisis to it coffin for peace and progress to reign (.Fasakin, Oyero, Oyesomi, & Okorie (2017).

There was, thus, a great need for self-moderation by journalists who were already abusing the excessive freedom. The social responsibility theory, thus, came on board. Central to the core assumptions of the theory is the fact that the press has the right to criticize government and institutions, but also has certain basic responsibilities to maintain the stability of society (Suntai & Targema, 2017). Online media platforms have provided the basis to expand the tenets of the theory to include the audiences as well, who have assumed the status of reporters or journalists. With the rise of public and citizen journalism, there is a need to extend the assumptions of the theory to the masses as well. Online readers who comment on media content are also seen within this premise as creators of media content, as the comments, they make form the basis for subsequent discussion on the issues raised in the media. Many readers form opinions based on the pattern of comments that usually trail online news stories.

It is within this framework that the paper finds it pertinent to re-interrogate the social responsibility question, as it relates to the key terms of 'freedom' and 'responsibility' in the pattern of readers' interaction on online news sites in Nigeria.

Methodology

This paper employs secondary data collections. This discursive paper is based on Library content analysis. According to Asemah, Gubawu, Ekhareafo and Okpanachi

(2012) content analysis is an analysis based on the manifest content of the mass media message. Wright (1986) describes content analysis as a research technique for the systematic classification and description of communication content according to certain, usually predetermined categories (Cited in Asemah, et al., 2012). Ajala (1999) also defines content analysis as the systematic objective and quantitative procedure devised to examine the content of recorded information. Looking at the meaning of content analysis, it can be used in research project that seeks to describe and explain information on hate speech in online readers' comments during 2019 general elections in Nigeria.

Therefore, this paper reviewed literature on hate speech in online readers' comments during 2019 general elections in Nigeria. The analyses covered from February to March, 2019 and included the following newspapers, namely; Guardian, Premium, the Daily Trust, Sahara Reporters, and Vanguard. Generally, the main sources of data for the study included a review of existing secondary library data on hate speech in online readers' comments during Nigeria 2019 general elections.

Discussion of Findings

Some issues concerning hate speech and how it spread:

Readers' comments have become the in-thing in the Nigerian media landscape. It is observed that some news sites attract readers' comments more than others which are basically online news platforms with no offline (print) versions that have the highest number of comments on their stories. Other news platforms that have both print and online versions also attract readers' comments, though relatively lower than the former.

Finding reveals that the nature of comments that trend on Nigerian online news sites when issues of national concern are raised can be positive comments, which are constructive in nature. Most often, positive commenters do not agree with other commenters, but such disagreement is expressed in a matured manner, devoid of insult, name-calling and abusive words that constitute the gamut of hate speech.

According to a report by the Center for Information Technology and Development (CITAD), there is increase in hate speeches among Nigerians on various social media platforms. The report indicated that 60.3% of hate speeches recorded came from Facebook, 5.9% from newsletters and 4% from blogs surveyed within the period. It revealed further that 63% of perpetrators of hate speeches are prominent people while 39% of them are ordinary citizens (non-prominent). Additionally, 35.2% of the hate speeches surveyed, insult people for their religion, abuse people for their ethnic or linguistic affiliation, or express contempt against people because of their place of origin (Alkassim, 2017 as cited in Auwal, 2018, p.60).

In addition, negative comments also constitute a large chunk of the comments generated by readers as they discuss issues raised on the various news sites. Negative comments employ all sorts of mechanisms—name-calling, verbal assault/terror, insulting and abusive words, stereotypes etc. to demonize, antagonize or demean the target. Such

comments have the ability to steer discussion on the platforms off the progressive path to a retrogressive trend that diminishes the potentials of the platforms. Likewise, findings of a study by Ende and Dzukogi (2012) indicate that verbal terror attacks directed at individuals, ethnic groups, religious institutions and regions, as stereotypes were used to describe those involved. Comments deemed as offensive employed hate speech, threats, abusive language and assassination of character.

Another issue worthy of noting is the target of commentators on the platform. Targets here are categorized into issues, individuals/personalities, regions/religions, and groups. Most positive comments address issues. They speak to the issue at stake, and not the personalities or individuals involved in the issue. Such comments help to guide the direction of discussion and bring up salient perspectives to the issue raised in the news. Comments targeted at individuals, on the other hand, do not discuss issues, but personalities. Such comments are often negative in nature and are aimed at demeaning the personality, which they attack. Although few of the comments targeted at individuals are positive in nature, a vast majority of comments are negative and contain some varying degrees of hate speeches. Other commenters target their comments on regions or religions, ethnic group, political parties or organizations.

These are the direction of comments on Nigerian news sites that makes commenters derail from the issues at stake, and attack personalities, groups, regions and religions as well as tribes. It is obvious that hate speech has assumed a central position in the discussion of 2019 general elections on online news platforms, the implication of which has far-reaching effects on the struggle to proffer solutions into solving the issues of hate speeches among commenters in the country.

Causes of online hate speech among commenters

The following causes are online hate speech among commenters are put forward by Shsu.edu (2019).

Social order: Proponents of speech codes argue that they are needed to maintain the stability of society. Such rules serve to reinforce specific social values and protect the social order. In general, we accept that it is unacceptable to advocate killing others. Opponents argue that restriction of speech is a very dangerous precedent since freedom of expression is one of the values that is central to our way of life.

Liberty rights, freedom of speech, and autonomy: Libertarians argue that restricting hate speech is an unreasonable restriction of freedom of speech. They contend that the entire purpose of a right to free speech is to protect those who wish to say things that other people find objectionable. Put simply, you don't need a right to free speech when you are saying things everyone wants to hear. Also, there is a claim here that you do not have a right to not be offended. Others contend that hate speech is not simply an expression of ideas, but an attack on another person. As such, it is not protected under a

right to free speech. Another objection to hate speech comes in the form of complaints that rights are supposed to reinforce the autonomy of the individual and hate speech is antithetical to autonomy.

Civility and respect for human dignity: Opponents of hate speech argue that according to deontologists, rights stem from duties. Combining this with a primary duty to respect the dignity of others, they reject hate speech as a type of action that creates hostility, and oppression that are incompatible with a respect for dignity. The response to this argument basically says, you are right about the effects of hate speech, but the appropriate response is not legislation and speech codes. Instead, we should respond to hate speech by snubbing those who practice it. We should also attempt to provide an open exchange of ideas that shows these views to be baseless and ignorant.

Harm – non-maleficence: Do we have a duty to protect people from harm? Does hate speech cause harm? If we answer, "Yes." to both of these questions, then it appears that we have a duty to restrict hate speech. Opponents of this line of reasoning argue that it may be impossible to legislate against hate speech, yet maintain an atmosphere of tolerance and communication capable of generating reforms. Thus, they claim that the harm caused by hate speech laws may outweigh the harm caused to any individual or group in the long run. If we are going to legislate against hate speech, how to we separate hate speech from a call for reform?

The slippery slope: Some ethicists point to McCarthyism and contend that any restriction of speech no matter how well intentioned, runs the risk of starting us down a dangerous slide into rampant censorship. This issue leaves us with the questions: How do we distinguish hate speech from other sorts of objectionable speech? and Who gets to decide?

Pluralism and tolerance: This argument says that one of the goals of education in a multicultural society is to provide a forum to examine the ideas of all members and motivate informed decisions. It is argued that hate speech creates a hostile environment and limits the ability of some members of society to express their ideas. The response to this argument is that speech codes also, and in a more direct fashion, limit the ability of some members of society to express their ideas.

Impartiality, equal justice, and discrimination: Some ethicists argue that impartiality is not always appropriate for establishing justice. Recall the Marxist challenge to the death penalty. Their argument points out that in the United States citizens are not all equal. There is a long history of discrimination in our society and to treat all expressions as equal fails to account for this chilling fact about the context in which the ideas are being expressed. Opponents to this line of reasoning argue that it is inappropriate to people for their ideas because of the past deeds of others (Shsu.edu, 2019).

Possible proffered solution to curb online hate speech:

However, according to Jamekolok (2019) of the UNESCO, the following solutions were proposed to curb the problem of hate speech in our societies.

Education on media ethics: Countering tribalised hate speech begins by a realization that while freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, the emergence of social media has created multiple platforms for the production, packaging and dissemination of hate speech. Therefore, education on media ethics should focus on the rights and freedoms of journalists and their role in creating and promoting peaceful societies. Likewise, awareness must be raised on the political, social and cultural rights of individuals and groups, including freedom of speech, and the responsibilities and social implications that come with press freedom. Therefore, journalists must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to identify hate speech and to counteract hate speech messages.

Encourage conflict sensitive reporting and multicultural awareness campaigns: Conflict sensitive reporting will help dispel the 'us' against 'them' fallacy. Journalists should be taught conflict sensitive reporting skills. Multicultural awareness campaigns should emphasize knowledge about and respect for the diversity of cultures and traditions. Journalists must exercise professional standards in this and can write articles, air programmes and even speak with people without taking sides.

Regulate social media: There is a need to regulate social media and online interactivities of participants, especially when it comes to their comments on sensitive social issues. Controversially, many people are of the opinions that social media is very difficult to regulate without revoking the right to press freedom. But unequivocally, press freedom can be enhanced through education on media laws and ethics.

Encourage victims and witnesses to report hate speech related crimes: Hate speech remains largely invisible simply because many victims do not know where to report the cases or even understand that they are victims of hate speech.

End impunity against hate crimes: Impunity against hate crimes can be tackled by establishing monitoring and evaluation units in newsrooms. These units would then be tasked with monitoring hate speech trends, compiling reports and bringing these to the attention of key institutions and the civil society (Jame Kolok, 2019).

Legal frameworks for counteracting hate speeches

Ezeibe (2019) highlights some legal frameworks for counteracting hate speeches as expounded by Hylton (1996) who compared hate speech with free speech doctrine of J.S Mill which is enshrined in the constitutions of nations. He however noted that hate speech is not free speech. Hylton conceived hate speech as negative while free speech is a landmark achievement of democracy. Hence, most developed democracies added a clause on freedom of speech against the use of hate speech.

For example, Article 10 (2) of the European Convention on Human Rights provid that "the exercise of freedom of expression...may be subject to such formalitie conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law... the interest of nation security... for the protection of the reputation or right of others". Impressively, mo doctrines that established freedom of speech and expression in Nigeria added a claus to guard against hate speech, promote human dignity, societal cohesion and peace. Fc instance, section 39 (1) of the 1999 Constitution as amended in 2011 provides that "ever person shall be entitled to freedom of expression..."

More so, section 45 provides that nothing in section 39 shall invalidate any law tha is reasonably justifiable in a democratic society in the interest of public order, publi morality and for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedom of other persons Similarly, sections 95 and 96 of the 2010 Electoral Act prohibited the use of any language in campaigns that will hurt tribal, religious and/or sectional feelings. Other lega frameworks that abhor the use of derogatory language in Nigeria are the Political Party Code of Coduct (2013) and the Abuja Accord (2015).

Despite these legal frameworks, there has been notable growth in hate speech before, during and after the 2011 and 2015 elections in Nigeria. In fact, instances of hate speech have been published in print and electronic media, social or digital media and preached in podiums of both churches and mosques (Cited in Ezeibe, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper argues that some temperamental online commenters use the platforms to spew hatred, verbal assault, attack and demonize others. The paper avowed that, should hate speech trend continues unchecked, it will diminish the benefits which the platforms have to offer for the healthy discourse of political issues, and indeed, other related issues in the interest of democracy. Therefore, this paper is about re-awakening of the social responsibility rhetoric in the media industry. People must be freed to express their views on matters of national concern without restrictions, but such a freedom must be accompanied with responsibility, and where it is grossly abused.

Recommendations

Whenever national economic, political and social issues are discussed, as they relate to, and affect the different groups in Nigeria, the way and manner opinions are expressed via the online media outlets, especially commenters on online news reports, usually wear the toga of incitement. It is however, imperative to state that hate speech can step-up the tempo of hatred and hostility in a pluralistic society like Nigeria (Auwal, 2018). In view of the overwhelming influence of social media and its contents on the society, this paper recommends as follows:

1) That political actors that engage in the use of hate speeches during electioneering

should be punished according to the electoral laws of the country. Likewise, stringent punitive measures should be meted to media outlets that publish or broadcast hate speeches as a form of deterrent for the growth of democracy in Nigeria.

2) There is the need for high sense of responsibility and tolerance among commenters in online discourse, in order to make all appreciate the obvious values of this innovation. Through regular sensitisation by governmental agencies such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), Ministry of Information and Culture, and other non-governmental organisations, this is feasible.

3) That online news platforms should monitor and remove comments that have the potentials of adversely affecting the unity of the nation. This way, the platforms can be effectively utilized for healthy political discourse that will serve to consolidate the budding democracy in the country. Finally, there is need to explore how effective the platforms are in managing the myriad of ethno-religious conflicts that have engulfed the nation.

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