

Fake News and State-Diaspora Relations in Nigeria, 2015-2020

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Abstract

The advanced technological space has today democratised the territorial space of the mass media. Its primary function of informing, educating and entertaining have shaped the perception and influenced action of people as their watchdogs, agenda setting and force multipliers. On the contrary, this breakthrough in information communication technology has turned many people to untrained practicing journalist and made some trained journalists to become arm chair journalists, who publish to perish. In a bid to combat the spread of fake news in Nigeria given the volatility of the nation, the government and the people have been on the toes of journalist but all efforts seem fruitless. With the aid of agenda setting theory, we observed that there is a nexus between fake news and erosion of trust among Nigerian government and Nigerians in Diaspora on issues of national security. We recommend legislation against fake news peddling and a proactive action by the government to stop the inferno.

Keywords: Mass media, fake news, Nigerians in diaspora, national security, information communication technology

Introduction

The effects of fake news on the polity of nation states today cannot be underestimated and Nigeria is not an exception. Fake news is now a song in almost every tongue in view of its impact on people's perception of the workings, actions and reactions of government, organisation and individuals. This demonstrates the link between the media and politics in the present advanced communication networks of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Bluetooth, Twitter, Google Plus, Yahoo Messenger etc. The political actors and gladiators work in the environment shaped by the information communication networks with the media as prime actor.

In the view of Nasir (2008), the media shapes the perceptions of leaders and people. On the basis of these perceptions the states and political actors formulate and implement policies, especially during situations of crisis, political changes and inter/intra state relations. Chukwere and Onyebukwa, (2018, p.2) informed that "among the 21st century internet inventions, social media has defined and changed political interaction and communication across nations". This, according to them, it has done through fast and unfiltered dissemination of news which is sometimes adjudged fake.

Also, Rebecca (2019) noted that the significance of the media at both societal and political levels has become increasingly undeniable. The media has played a critical role in holding agencies accountable to their action and demanding accountability. While these roles are crucial to the development and the survival of democracy, they are also shunned by authorities and perceived to turn masses against regimes. The primary functions of the media in any society are to inform, educate and entertain. Beyond these, they serve as watchdogs of the society, agenda setters and force multipliers. The mass media have the power and ability to contribute enormously in Nigerian state and Nigerians in Diasporas' relations and this can be achieved through the observance of professional ethics and in accordance with the provisions of the constitution. Unfortunately, Fake news" has become an intractable problem and reckoning which requires mapping new pathways for online news verification and delivery. As people look the media to get information from the government, decision makers also use the media to give out information to the led. According to Ekwueme, (2008) our readers want the facts you heard or observed from your various sources, and not figment of your own imagination. Many people believe media messages to be gospel truth and, of course, some of the readers believe either rightly or wrongly that anything that is not carried in the media is not authentic.

Interestingly, the problem of fake news has attracted the attention of the Federal Government who recently launched a national campaign against fake news. According to Nigeria's Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed at the formal launching of the campaign stated that "fake news is becoming a serious threat to global peace and security and if left unchecked, could endanger human existence. The minister who described "fake news as a dangerous threat to democracy noted that fake news when mixed with hate speech would amount to a disaster waiting to happen" (Elebeke, 2018).

This paper is designed to examine the effects of fake news on Nigerian state and Nigerians in Diaspora relations. This, we intend to examine in this sequence: i. definition of concepts ii. theoretical framework of analysis iii. effect of fake news on Nigerian State and Nigerians in diaspora relations iv. Conclusion and recommendations.

Definition of Concepts

Mass Media: According to Asemah (2011), mass media could be described as “the channels or technological devices through which messages are conveyed to a large and heterogeneous audience. They are the vehicles that are used for conveying messages from a source to a large destination. In addition, mass media are the devices for moving messages across distance or time to accomplish mass communication”. It is internet-based communication services that allow a person to connect to the general public, to understand what others are doing and thinking, as well as their connections (Trottier and Fuchs, 2014). It is an online-based application built on the Web 2.0 platform with the idea to create and share individual contents (Sajithra & Patil, 2013). In this study, mass media means platform that connects people in sharing information, knowledge and many more.

Fake News: According to Wikipedia, fake news is a neologism often used to refer to fabricated news. This type of news, found in traditional news, social media or fake news websites, has no basis, but is presented as being factually accurate ([www.http//Wikipedia.com](http://Wikipedia.com)). Also, BBC (2017) stated that fake news means “false information deliberately circulated by those who have scant regard for the truth but hope to advance particular (often extreme) political causes and make money out of online traffic; or it could be false information circulated by journalists.

What could be documented evidence of the probable origin of fake news could be credited to Hearst with the infamous quotation:

You finish the pictures, I “finish the war”, a statement directed to Remington, a famous artist who was hired to illustrate the revolution erupting in Cuba in 1895. Remington wrote back to Hearst “everything is quiet” and added that he would soon head home. But the newspaper magnate responded with the famous quote, which has since been used more crudely to suggest the media’s capacity to inject malign influence into their reportage especially in international affairs, (Hearst cited by Auxier, G.W.1940).

According to Globepost.com. “The American invasion of Iraq and eventual killing of Saddam Hussein was a product of fake news. Hence, fake news is a product of a person’s imagination for purposes that may or may not be mischievous. This informs an observation that the term “fake news” is an oxymoron since news is supposed to be factual (rather than based on imagination or opinion) (Kershner as cited by Tandoc, Wei Lim & Ling, 2018). Kukah (2019) maintains that there are certain things that lead to the spread of fake news. He observed that among such reasons was ‘information deficit’ and

therefore said there was the need for government to provide information to the public in a coherent manner on its various activities in order to stop the spread of fake news. In line with the above, Odinkalu (2019) argued that the leading purveyor of fake news is government. According to him, government keeps the people to be uneducated so that they will not be knowledgeable about its activities.

National Security

According to Bamidele (2012) national security should be seen, in the sense of protection of the polity through ensuring that the national interest is known, sustained, promoted and preserved. In a division of labour setting, national security is ensured through security agencies. He adds that national security is the decision-making process concerned with the identification of potentials and actual threats, and the mobilization of resources in scale that promptly ensures the safety and stability of the nation state, while simultaneously, enhancing the promotion of national development. Again, Nasir (2008) contends that the term 'national security' has long been used by politicians as a symbolic phrase and by military leaders to describe a policy objective. National security has a wide meaning and all-embracing dimensions.

Meanwhile, according to Ali (2013), national security means the protection of the lives, rights, dignity and property of citizens. It also means the protection of resources, cultural integrity, territory, sovereignty and lawful institutions of a country.

Nigerians in Diaspora

The concept of diaspora in international politics appears problematic following various strides and patters of migration as well as conflicting historical sources from migration scholars. However, it will not stop scholarly interrogation of the concept. According to Sheffer (1986) cited in Aigbinode (2011:5) three proposed criteria exist: "a dispersed group that holds a collective identity across international locations; the group has some internal organization of its own; the group in dispersion keeps ties with the homeland, be it symbolic or real". The dynamism in migration today has influenced some changes in Sheffer's idea as the notion of voluntary migration emerges as added in Cohen's (1997) conception of diasporic communities and easing internal organization

requirement because it is the collective identity that keeps diaspora communities together in contemporary times.

Cohen suggested that diaspora has the following generic characteristics:

- dispersal from an original homeland, often traumatically, to two or more foreign nations;
- the expansion from a homeland in search of work, in pursuit of trade or to further colonial ambition;
- a collective memory and myth about the homeland, including its location, history and achievements;
- an idealization of the putative ancestral home and a collective commitment to its maintenance, restoration, safety, prosperity, even to its creation;
- the development of a return movement that gains collective support;
- a strong ethnic group consciousness sustained over a long period of time and based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history and the belief in a common fate;
- a possibly troubled relationship with host societies, suggesting a lack of acceptance or the possibility that another calamity might befall this group;
- a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries of settlement; and the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries with a tolerance of pluralism (Cohen, 1997 in Crush, Chikanda, Pendleton, Caesar, Ramachandran, Eberhardt & Hill, 2013, p.9).

Some scholars have focused their definition on issues ranging from economic exchanges and other inter-state linkages and diaspora home state relations. One definition consistent with this emphasis sees diaspora as “populations of migrant origin, who are scattered among two or more destinations, between which they develop multifarious links involving flows and exchanges of people and resources; between the homeland and destination countries, and among destination countries” (Van Hear et al., 2004: 3). Membership of a contemporary diaspora now implies “potential empowerment based on the ability to exert socio-economic and political influence in both the homeland and the host land” (Butler, 2001: 190). This study adopts the definition by the African Union which links membership of the African Diaspora with a remarkable interest for African development as hereunder:

The African Diaspora consists of peoples of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship or nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union (AU, 2005, cited in Bakewell 2008a: 9).

In the same vein and for the purpose of this paper, the Nigerian Diaspora could be referred to as those Nigerian citizens living outside the country and who are desirous to contribute or are already contributing to the development of Nigerian state.

Information Communication Technology

According to Oxford Advance Learners Dictionary, information technology is the study or use of electronic equipment especially computer for sorting, analyzing and sending out information. According to UNESCO (2002), ICT is a scientific, technological and engineering discipline and management technique used in handling information, its application and association with social economics, and cultural matter. Information technology is the creative application of scientific and systematic knowledge, tools and techniques to the solution of problems of human communication and information system. Such problems may be found in industry, commerce, education or even health care. According to National Teachers Institute (2007), Information Communication Technology is a generic term to cover acquisition, processing, storage and dissemination of information- textual, numerical, pictorial and vocal. The concept is restricted to systems dependent on micro-electronic based on combination of computing and telecommunications technology since the early 20th century.

Theoretical Framework

In this study, agenda setting theory is adopted to give a clear understanding of the relationship existing between variables under study. According to Mcoombs & Vanenzuela (2007), the idea of an agenda-setting role of the press has its origins in Walter Lippmann's 1922 piece on Public Opinion, which begins with a chapter titled "The world outside and the pictures in our heads". It was only in 1968, however, that this idea that the press constitutes the bridge between the "world outside and the pictures in our heads" was put to empirical test. McCombs & Shaw (1972), used the 1968 U.S. presidential election as a case study to find out if there was a relationship between the priority issues of the mass media and the priority issues of the public. So, over time, those aspects of public affairs that are prominent in the media usually become prominent in

public opinion. This ability to influence issues, persons and topics are perceived as the most important of the day is called the agenda-setting role of the mass media (McCombs, 2004). Further, these scholars contend that the repetition of messages about public issues in the news day after day, along with the pervasiveness of the mass media in our daily lives, constitute a major source of journalism's influence on the audience. Meanwhile, the agenda-setting role of the news media is not limited to focusing public attention on a particular set of issues, but also influences our understanding and perspective on the topics in the news. Accordingly, Asemah (2009) contends that, the media, whether electronic or print often set agenda for the public to follow; they monitor trends and events in our society and raise their agenda based on what they have monitored. In essence, whatever issue the media raised becomes an issue of public concern.

From the foregoing, it can be appreciated that the media plays a powerful role of influencing public attention and action but, arguably, the apex of media effects is influencing the agenda of attributes, opinions and attitudes, even observable behaviour, regarding issues and political figures. Whereas, all these passages of information, from one source to another whether official or unofficial by media experts, decision makers and others aim at attracting response from the receivers. The use of this theory will assist in understanding the influence of fake news as propagated by the media.

History of Nigeria State and Nigerians in Diaspora Relations

Until recently, there has been absence of Nigerian diaspora policy although relations have always existed between the Nigerian government and her diaspora citizens. Beginning in the 1970s, efforts were made by the Nigerian government to connect with and engage the Nigerian diaspora on issues affecting their home land. According to Sola and Olukoya (2011:80) "there is no doubt that the relationship between the Nigerian government and Nigerian diaspora in contemporary times is governed by this diaspora approach to development". Former President Olusegun Obasanjo launched a Presidential Dialogue with Nigerians Abroad in 2002 and this marked a significant milestone in government-diaspora relations. To facilitate Nigeria state and Nigerians in diaspora relations, the Nigerian government also established the Nigerians in the Diaspora Organization, (NIDO) which has an office based at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Abuja. In appreciation of this attention by Nigerian government, NIDO in response also

set up a network of branches in Nigerian embassies abroad. Nigerians living abroad are officially encouraged to organize themselves and to link up with NIDO branches in their respective host countries. Arrangements were also made to have NIDO branches not only in almost all European countries, but also in Asia specifically in Singapore, Malaysia and Australia and in some specific African countries such as South Africa, Ghana, Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire" (Sola & Olukoya 2011).

In a similar development the Nigerian National Volunteer Services (NNVS), an organ under the office of the Secretary to the Government of Federation was also established by the Federal Executive Council to among others, enhance a constructive engagement between Nigeria and her diaspora community. NNVS core mandate is "to mobilize Nigerian professionals living abroad for capacity building, through encouraging temporary visits, technical missions and sabbaticals to Nigerian institutions or through giving summer courses" (De Haas, 2006).

As a tacit demonstration of Nigerian government commitment and seriousness to this new diaspora initiative, July 25 every year was declared the Nigerian Diaspora Day by former President Olusegun Obasanjo. This was to recognize the Nigerian diaspora as an important stakeholder in the Nigerian project. It was first celebrated in 2006 with the 2nd Science and Technology conference, which was initiated a year earlier by the Nigerian Volunteer Service (NNVS). On 25 July 2008 Former President Umaru Musa Yar'adua declared open the 2nd Nigerian Diaspora Day and the 3rd Science and Technology Conference. More than 400 Nigerians abroad registered to attend the conference from 32 countries. The theme of the conference was "Connecting Nigeria with Her Diaspora" (FGN,2007).

The Federal Government's initiative to engage her diaspora which began in 2002 was motivated by the high profile of a number of distinguished Nigerians in the diaspora endowed with business and intellectual property, the accumulation of human capital and investments by Nigerians abroad, especially professionals and the fact that other developing countries notably India, China, Malaysia, Ireland, and others, had consistently tapped the experience and resources of their diasporas to accelerate their economic growth and development (FGN, 2007). India for instance, partly through the assistance of its diaspora, has become one of the global giants in terms of information technology. The Irish diaspora also contributed in no small measure in bridging the managerial gap in the

Republic of Ireland and this helped to transform the country as one of the leading countries in Europe. Invariably, there is no denying the fact that diasporas are the most important strategic stakeholders in the migration and development field. The UNDP even described the African diaspora as the greatest offshore asset of Africa (UNDP, 2008, 4-5).

On 25 February 2010, the World Bank hosted some 400 members of the African Diaspora, representatives from 19 countries and 137 associations gathered in Washington D.C. and discussed ways to mobilise resources in order to push development in Africa. The participants particularly emphasised the need to devote sustained and additional resources to improving governance. Another prototype of the NIDO initiative by government is a new group known as the Industry Growth, Investment and Competitiveness in Africa (IGICA) which is more or less like an amalgam of foreign based Nigerian business groups. IGICA aims at providing networking opportunities between private sector and governments between emerging markets and developed markets, between small businesses and international private sector, as well as between universities and industry and between parastatals and the private sector. IGICA is also interested in creating networking environment for Africa's knowledge transfer partnerships and commercialisation of innovation for industrial growth and investment in Africa (Onuorah & Okwe, 2009).

A replica to the Industry Growth, Investment and Competitiveness in Africa is the UK- based organisation, Africa Recruit launched in 1999. This organisation has effectively utilised the skills, knowledge, remittances and networks of the diaspora for the benefit of Nigeria and several African countries. IGICA has also been facilitating interactions between recruitment agencies in Europe and job seekers from Africa (UNDP, 2008:16). Having seen the efforts of the Nigerian state in establishing Nigerian diaspora relations, our next task is to examine the effects of fake news on Nigerian state and Nigerians in diaspora relations.

Effects of fake news on Nigerian State and Nigerians in Diaspora Relations

Diaspora "is where the living meets the dead." "...It is where Nigerians can bump into a distant Nigerian cousin who they never even knew was in the same diasporic environment... And everyone asked said they wanted to go home. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but - when their country is at peace, when they have made a bit of money, when democracy returns - they will return".

The above reflects Robin White's (2005- BBC News) description of the experiences and feelings of Nigerians emigrants residing in little Peckham state of London city who valued home through little Lagos City of Peckham. Hence, "the issues of home, belonging and identity are central to the diasporic experience (Alakija,2016). The concept of home is subject to the most debate because the groups of people comprising a specific diaspora group still maintain links with their original homeland even though they now live outside of it. Consequently, the extent of the influence of the homeland on members of the diaspora, and where they perceive 'home' to be, has generated intense debate among scholars (Clifford, 1994; Safran, 1991). Of particular importance to this debate is whether the homeland remains the "authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty" among members of diasporic communities (Safran, 1991:83-84). Within this context, Brah (1996:192) posits that 'home' is a 'mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination' expressed in 'a lived experience of a locality'.

Nigerians in diaspora use the media to navigate ties with the home and their places of settlement. The media are windows to global trends, connect them to Nigerians all over the world, as well as keep them abreast of events and issues in Nigeria. Fake news has made the seductive psychological attraction of the 'home, to Nigerians in diaspora a mirage as Nigerian state seems not to offer pragmatic value in their life at home because of fear of insecurity. The issue of insecurity continues to pose a serious challenge to nations and the global community at large. Without a doubt, issues bordering on maintaining or tackling security challenges across the globe have taken centre stage in the international political arena. To this end, policy-makers across the globe and decision-makers and leaders, particularly in Nigeria, have come to the realization that security remains an unequivocal policy challenge in governance. Apart from these, "the dynamics of contemporary global security challenges, including terrorism, equally influence and inform the crescendos of security challenges in Nigeria today (Chukwuere and Onyebukwa (2018). Intrinsically, Nigeria, as a subsisting global entity, inherited some of her internal security challenges by virtue of this status (Ani & Onyebukwa, 2016). Security challenges such as terrorism in Nigeria, which premised originally as a global phenomenon and was inherently alien to the country, is a handy example. It was perhaps the above which informed the opinion of Governor of Cross River State, Professor Ben Ayade who blamed social media for insecurity in the country and called for its strict

regulation. He maintains that “If there is anything to regulate, it is social media. In China, social media is regulated. Dissemination of falsehood must have its penalty. Social media is causing divisiveness in the country (Ayade, 2019).

The implication of this is that Nigerians in diaspora finds their home environment hostile. This much was the submission of Nigeria’s Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, when he received a delegation of Nigerians in Diaspora Initiative (NIDO) on July 27, 2021 in Abuja. insisted that some Nigerians in Diaspora still rely on platforms that peddle fake news and misinformation about Nigeria. He further alleged that secessionist groups that are campaigning around the world for their causes have identified some Nigerians in Diaspora to propagate their fake narratives about the country. He therefore urged NIDO to “seize the initiative from those who are bent on painting Nigeria bad in the comity of nations, especially in the area of insecurity” (Silas, 2021, para.5). The minister also implored the organization to “leverage its contacts in government circles, parliamentary groups and global think tanks in world capitals” to help change the narrative and sweep the carpet off the feet of “secessionist groups, insurgents and anarchists” who, according to him, “are bent on pushing false narratives to portray Nigeria in a bad light” (Para. 6).

Meanwhile, following the EndSARS protests in Nigeria in 2020, Nigerians in the diaspora had unequivocally condemned the alleged massacre of innocent protesters at the Lekki toll plaza in Lagos by security agents acting with the approval of the highest political authorities in the country. However, a few months after the incident, a group of Nigerians in the diaspora under the name Nigerians in Diaspora Monitoring Group (NDMG), Ohio, United States, issued a rebuttal of their earlier condemnation of the alleged massacre and went on to call on the United Nation, United States, United Kingdom and other nations to “withdraw their statements that appeared to taunt the Nigerian government over the Lekki tollgate shooting”. According to a statement signed by the group’s President, Erasmus Kuti, “with overwhelming evidence now rubbishing supposed massacre in Lagos state, the NDMG...it is logical for the international community to apologise to the President Muhammadu Buhari-led government”. The statement further declared that like the rest of the world, the NDMG reacted with disgust over the alleged shooting of peaceful #EndSARS protesters by the Nigerian Army but that “that sentiment changed after the actual picture of the incident surfaced”. According to

the group, the peddlers of the fake news carefully “planned, selected, manipulated and curated the photographs and videos that were used to mislead key decision-makers across the globe.” The statement insisted that the country has been the hapless victim of fake news, hence the need for nations to withdraw their earlier statements (<https://www.blueprint.ng/fake-news-nigerians-in-diaspora-see-withdrawal-of-statements-by-the-un-us/>).

While the preceding narratives from both the government and the NDGM may not be wholly correct, they are clear indicators that the issue of fake news does not only constitute a direct potent threat to the state-diaspora relations in Nigeria, but is also capable of instigating mistrust among segments of the Nigerian diaspora, which would also have the overall effect of negatively impacting on the ability of the diaspora to present a united front in their support for and demand on the Nigerian state.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the effects of fake news on Nigerian state and Nigerians in diaspora relations. Significantly, the impact of the democratization of the media space arising from technological innovation which makes the media to shape the perception and influence action of people as their watchdogs, agenda setting and force multipliers received elaborate attention. The study found that there is a nexus between fake news and erosion of trust between the Nigerian government and Nigerians in Diaspora on issues of national security and citizens’ rights. We, therefore, recommend that both parties should close ranks to nip this incipient virus in the bud before it assumes an epidemic of even a pandemic proportion.

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