

Rhetoric of Fake News and Social Media Activism in Nigeria

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Abstract

This article examines the meaning of fake news in its different understandings, the closing of the media space in Nigeria, the rise of critical voices on social media, analysis of the strategies employed by the Government “trio” of Nigeria's Information and Culture Minister, Mr Lai Mohammed, the President's Special Adviser on Media and Publicity, Mr Femi Adesina and the president's Senior Special Assistant (SSA) on media and publicity, Mr Shehu Garba to muzzle critical voices, particularly in Tweets. The study uses rhetorical analysis to analyse the selected government officials' tweets and indicate attempts at muzzling critical voices and thereby endangering Nigeria's democracy. The study, thus, recommends a new and collaborative local and global effort to protect free speech and critical voices in Nigeria.

Keywords: rhetoric, fake news, critical voices, social media, democracy.

Introduction

Social media have brought huge transformations to the way people interact and communicate online, thanks to the internet revolutions of

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the 1990s. People feel connected more closely on social media due to its flexibility, accessibility and affordability. Uniquely, it has become the major source of receiving information from other like-minded sources and even persons. For many people, it has become the sole avenue for self-expression, expression of divergent views and opinions, and protests.

Many governments have been uncomfortable with the freedom that social media gives citizens to express themselves freely without any form of censorship. This contrasts with the mainstream media where governments exert great influence on the administrators from license renewal regulations and sanctions for breach of contracts and infringements of extant rules of engagement. Many such kinds of influences can be tantamount to some sort of censorship. Some governments, frustrated at their inability to regulate social media have toiled with the ideas of regulating social media through the introduction of "social media bills". This was the case with Nigeria's so-called social media bill popularly referred to as the "hate speech bill" in which the government sought to control the freedom of speech of Nigerians (Egielewa, 2021b). This has not largely succeeded due to backlash by 'civil society organisations, very important personalities within and outside the country as well as pressure from advanced countries who prefer to stay on the side of free social media space for Nigerians.

Officials of the Nigerian government have used threats, subtle threats and executed threats against critical voices on social media (Egielewa, 2021b). They have hinged their reasons for these actions on the premise that such critical social media voices spread "fake news". Indeed, beginning from 2015 at the run-off to the 2016 election of Donald

Trump as president of the United States, the concept of fake news has moved from its original meaning of “news that wasn't true and designed to spread lies, hoaxes and conspiracies” (Lee, 2018; Kleinman, 2018) to anything that Trump doesn't like. In Nigeria's context, fake news is anything that doesn't favour government rhetoric or is anti-government or critical of government policies (Egielewa, 2021b).

This article analyses how Nigeria has attempted to muzzle critical voices in the name of fake news. The text will further interrogate how these kinds of rhetoric threaten and endanger Nigeria's democracy. This article will conclude by making recommendations for Nigeria's government and other stakeholders who work to safeguard the freedom of speech.

Methodology: Rhetorical Analysis

The rhetorical analysis uses the facts that have been confirmed and are already in the public domain and applies them as a basis for the research and critical evaluation of the material (Pedamkar, n.d) to prove a hypothesis or support an idea. Qualitative and quantitative facts are used in analytical methods. In other words, analytical research “brings together subtle details to create more provable assumptions”.

The rhetorical analysis attempts to explain why something is true which in turn requires critical thinking skills and careful assessment of the facts. Indeed it offers new ideas about your data. Analytical research is based on descriptive research because it uses facts already determined in descriptive research and critically analyses them in analytical research. The main difference is that while descriptive research says what happens, analytical research says why it happens (Cogentica,

2021; Omair, 2015). It is an approach of finding supporting evidence to current research being done to make the work more reliable and to form new ideas about the topic being studied. In other words, rhetorical analysis involves literary research, public opinion, scientific trials and meta-analysis (Reference.com, 2020). In this study, selected tweets of three Nigerian government officials are shown to indicate attempts at gagging critical voices in Nigeria against the principle of freedom of speech guaranteed by the Nigerian constitution (section 39 of the 1999 Constitution).

This article used secondary sources and facts in the public domain such as tweets of government officials and private Nigerian citizens. All critical Tweets were collected from the selected three government officials between 2017 and 2020. The authenticated government officials' Twitter accounts were visited and all tweets that were critical of the opposition were harvested for analysis.

Statehood in Nigeria and Digital Challenges

In Africa, like in many parts of the world, the nature, quality and characteristics of governance can affect the degree to which the constituent countries can enjoy peace, stability and economic development (Crocker, 2019). Such governance can confer legitimacy on authority and legitimate authority engenders the establishment of laws and norms that make an unrestrained exercise of power impossible (Klingebiel & Grimm, 2007). In other words, dictatorship and autocracy are curtailed and even prevented when a legitimate authority is in place. While many African nations inherited constitutions composed and bequeathed to them by colonial masters, several nations

are still unable to cut themselves off the “identity vacuum” and properly midwife growth for the good of Africans.

In 2015, the influential Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance reported that 'overall governance progress in Africa is stalling' and did not award the prize for that year. Stalling of governance is hinged on the weak performance of critical development indices such as educational access (especially for women), climate change impact and mitigation, development and income growth rates, demographic trends, internet access, urbanisation rates, and conflict events, freedom of speech amongst others (Crocker, 2019).

In the changing landscape of governance in which the balance of power between official and non-official actors is changing, just as networked activists are asserting their ability to organise and take to the streets on behalf of diverse causes, particularly through the media of information communication technologies such as smartphones. This has thus given birth to the concept of digitisation of African politics in which not just political active deploy those means for smooth communication with their citizens but also non-political activities such as private citizens, activists and non-governmental organisations also deploy them to monitor and supervise governance at all levels. This digitisation of African politics poses real challenges for political leaders in Africa because of the potential tools to be used to hold the government accountable. The response is a clampdown by the government on these tools (Crocker, 2019).

In terms of technological advancements, Africa is undergoing rapid

change due to the confluence of mobile and broadband technologies, which has led to increased availability of mobile broadband, declining smartphone prices and the appeal of social networking propelled by accessibility to the internet (Crocker, 2019; Gillward, 2017; Ngonso & **Egielewa**, 2018). Nonetheless, internet penetration in most countries is still very low and data is expensive (Gillward, 2017) and the digital gap between digital native and immigrants still make it impossible for many Africans to use mobile devices effectively and efficiently. A “2007-2008 Responsible Investment Association (RIA) demand-side survey across 14 African countries found that the bottom three-quarters of mobile phone users spent on average between 11 per cent and 27 per cent of their income on mobile communications, rather than the standard reference of two per cent to three per cent of income spent in developed economies” (Gillward, 2017). The major challenges confronting African statehood is the concept of “big men” (Klingebiel & Grimm, 2007) which describes “very powerful persons, usually members of the executive arm of government, who exercise power that either disenfranchises large populations or even put some sections of citizens' lives at risks due to weak institutions. Such people may include journalists, civil rights activists and democracy activists, including those active and using social media. One such group are those who have found a “voice” online via social media platforms to express themselves. In Nigeria, for example, one major reason that the “big men” have put forward for their clampdown on democracy activists is that such persons spread “fake news”.

Concept of “Fake News” and its Many Underpinnings

The concept of “fake news” is probably one of the most used and abused

in recent times, particularly after US President Donald Trump used it very frequently and contextually in several of his tweets (Egielewa, 2021b). Scholars do not agree on a universally agreed definition (Egielewa, 2021b; Lazer, 2017; Ordway, 2017; Wardle, 2017). However, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) have attempted to define “fake news” as “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers” (p.213) or a “distortion of facts” Gentzkow, Shapiro & Stone cited in Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Also, Hindman and Barash (2018) and Lazer et al. (2018) define fake news as “disinformation” (information created or spread with the intent to deceive) and “misinformation” (false content that is spread by those who may mistakenly believe it to be true). The factor of “disinformation” in the above definition is captured in the definition of Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center, thus: “misinformation that has the trappings of traditional news media, with the presumed associated editorial processes” (Sommariva et al., 2018, p.2).

These definitions do not capture sundry “cousins” or dimensions of fake news such as 1) unintentional reporting of mistakes, 2) rumours that do not originate from a particular news article; (3) conspiracy theories (these are, by definition, difficult to verify as true or false, and they are typically originated by people who believe them to be true); (4) satire that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual; 5) false statements by politicians; and 6) reports that are slanted or misleading but not outrightly false (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Fake news and its different dimensions can be traced as far back as the “Great Moon Hoax” of 1835 in the USA, in which the *New York Sun*

published a series of articles about the discovery of life on the moon and as recent as the 2010 “Obama birther hoax” in which Donald Trump claimed that the then-president Barack Obama was not born in the United States and therefore ineligible to be the president of the United States as Figure 1 shows. Both were later found to be fake.

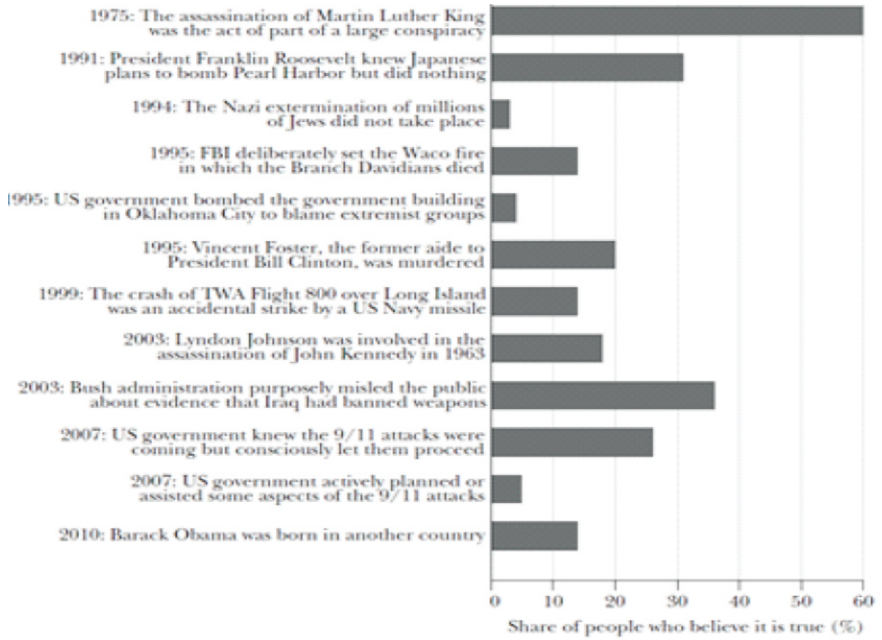


Figure 1: Share of Americans who believed twelve (12) fake news between 1975 and 2010.

Source: Allcott & Gentzkow (2017).

The concept of fake news in the contemporary era, particularly with the debut of social media, is growing in importance and there are many reasons for this growth. The first is the lower barrier to entry into the digital space. In other words, having a website is easy and there is little or no regulation of entry and in most cases, these come at little or no

cost. The second is that social media enable a high possibility of sharing fake news than the traditional mainstream media due to its speed and great reach (Egielewa, 2021b; Sommariva et al., 2018). They are probably the easiest form to disseminate inaccurate and fake news before they are discovered and flagged down by the owners. In mainstream media, fake news is hardly allowed because they are eliminated by the “gatekeeping” process and “editorial critical eye” of editors (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The third is the continuing decline in trust and confidence in mainstream media which makes it possible for more and more people to resort to online for their information. The fourth is the rise of political polarization in which negative feelings and hostility towards each side of the political spectrum cause many political-leaning online media to be created to counter the dominance of mainstream media considered to further the political interests of rivals.

Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) and Enoch Pratt Free Library (2020) have collectively classified fake news into eight categories. These are: (i) unintentional reporting of mistakes: This occurs when social media users share information that they did not know was false, (ii) rumours that do not originate from a particular news article: This occurs when untrue information is deliberately shared by social media users to mislead other social media users and consumers, (iii) conspiracy theories: This happens when social media users share information they believe to be true without any scientific backing and which in fact may be false, (iv) satire: This occurs when social media users use comedy to deliberately twist information and relate it to society which has the potential of misleading consumers to believe a piece of true information

to be false, (v) false statements by politicians: This occurs when political actors pass on information to their followers, loyalists and the generality of the public to convince them that such information is true when it is false, (vi) slanted true information: This happens when a piece of information that is not necessarily false, is so slanted and presented by the creators that the consumers believe them to be false, thereby misleading the consumers, (vii) deliberate misinformation: This occurs when fake news is deliberately created and shared mainly for economic reasons and (viii) false headlines: This occurs when the headline of a news story does not reflect the content in the news story itself to attract the traffic of "clicks", otherwise called "clickbait", to the account of the creators.

Social Media as a Democratic Tool for Free Expression

Social media, which in general mean computer-mediated communication (McIntyre, 2014), have been referred to by some authors (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; McIntyre, 2014; Rosenfeld et al., 2018; Sommariva et al., 2018) as social networking sites (SNS) due to their ability to connect users from different levels and across boards. Thus, while Sajithra and Rajindra (2013) refer to social media as simply "conversation online" (p.69), Sommariva et al. (2018) define social networking sites as "web-based services that allow users to create a profile and connect with other individuals within the system" (p.246). However, Boyd and Ellison cited in (McIntyre, 2014) define social media in a broader sense as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection,

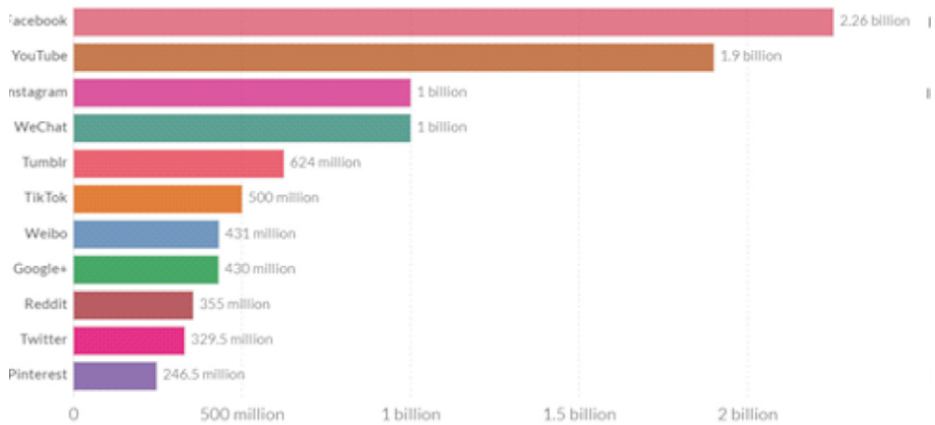
and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211).

In this context of “digital activism” more properly referred to as social media activism, social media have made collective and connective action possible by providing and mobilising information that is either not available in other media types or is more speedily processed on social media than others. It creates an avenue for Nigerians to "freely talk" (Sutherland, 2017). This new digital and social media space is particularly significant in a society that is reeling with memories of repression from military rule. This opportunity gives Nigerians a "political voice" that makes it easier to "wriggle out of previous power traps" (Sutherland, 2017), changing as it were the rules of the game. This "new power" makes it possible to coordinate protests, and helps social media users pursue political causes while creating opportunities for political debates, spreading enthusiasm and enabling emotional connection with each other (Uwalaka, 2019).

With Facebook having the largest social media quota of 2.4 billion users in a global social media population of 7.7 billion people in the world, closely followed by YouTube and WhatsApp with more than one billion users each, social media exert great influence on people globally and affect how people find, access and organise information. Social media are also impacting how people demand political change in many societies (Roser et al., 2015).

Figure 2: Number of people using social media globally as of 2018.

Source: Roser, Ritchie & Ortiz-Ospina (2015).



Findings

Nigerians' Use of Social Media Activism

Social media have been used to promote free speech since their inception in 1997 (Ahmad, 2018; Hendricks, 2020). This has been propelled by the ubiquity of cheap smartphones and easy accessibility to the internet, courtesy of mobile service providers from about the year 2000 with social media platforms particularly Facebook and Twitter becoming Nigerians' favourites (Sutherland, 2017; Egielewa, 2021c). The power of social media as tools for activism and free speech came to the fore with the Arab Springs of 2011 which started in Tunisia and eventually saw many regimes toppled within the space of 12 months, including Yemen, Egypt, Algeria, Libya, and led to a protracted civil war in Syria when the president refused to yield to the quest of protesters for regime change.

In 2012, shortly after then-president Goodluck Jonathan announced an

increment of the Premium Motor Spirit (PMS) or petrol from N97 (\$0.3) to N145 (\$0.4), Nigerians turned to social media to express their anger. Thereafter mobilisation started for what came to be known as the "Occupy Nigeria" protests, a usage that meant the non-violent resistance against political forces of oppression in Nigeria (Uwalaka, 2019). This was at a time when social media use was increasing in Nigeria.

Social media platforms, especially Twitter, referred to as "Tweetsphere" has unarguably become the prime platform for the free expression, elevation and amplification of issues that bother Nigerians, thereby putting them in the public domain.

In 2015, Senator Bala Ibn Na'Allah of Nigeria's Kebbi State proposed the controversial "Bill for an Act to Prohibit Frivolous Petitions and Other Matters Connected Therewith" (aka the 'Social Media Bill'). The reactions of Nigerians on Twitter (see Figure 3) led to the bill being shut down (BellaNaija.com, 2015)



Figure 3: Some reactions of Nigerians on Twitter to the proposed Social Media Bill in 2015.

Source: (BellaNaija.com, 2015; Roser et al., 2015).

Similarly, in 2017, Nigerians' demand on social media via the hashtag#OPENNASS led to the publication of the budget of the 8th Senate in the 2017 Appropriation Bill, which eventually led to direct scrutiny of the legislators' salaries and led to the call for the reduction of the extremely high salaries of Nigeria's legislators which in 2017 amounted to \$540,000 per year per legislator as the tweets below show.

Because of our clamouring for #OpenNASS, they want to stifle and criminalise NGOs. We will not relent till they are transparent and accountable.

-EiE Nigeria (@EiENigeria), Dec 13, 2017

We still do not know how much our senators earn. Join open #OpenNASS and lend your voice... Yes, your little voice matters”

-REFLECTIONS (@ReflexionNaija), Nov 28, 2017

Lest we forget the mind-boggling amount Senators earn as salaries and allowances. #OpenNASS

-Mushin&Odi-Olowo (@MushOdiWatch), Oct 27, 2017

Charity begins at home. The public has demanded for #OpenNASS but the Senate has refused to open its book and still operates in opacity. Let the Senate lead by example. Tell us what you earn from the public treasury.

-TOM (@mhassantom), Dec 22, 2017

We thank the Senate for raising alarm that leads to the sacking of corrupt SGF, we hope they will make their salaries public as in #OPENNASS.

-Abdul-MajidLawanWaziri (@Abdul_Majid84), Oct 31, 2017

There are many other instances in which Nigerians have used social media in their activism, four major examples include. #Occupy Nigeria, #BringBackOurGirls, #ChildNotBride and #RevolutionNow.

1. #Occupy Nigeria

#Occupy Nigeria was a movement that galvanised both the old and young people in 2012 after then-president Goodluck Jonathan increased the pump price of fuel on 1st January 2012. This led almost immediately to the increase of prices of basic goods and services such as food, transportation and rents by up to 120%. This precipitated the protests in major cities of Nigeria and went beyond the prices of petrol to general dissatisfaction with government and government officials amplified by corruption, inequality and poverty (Uwalaka, 2019). Since the mainstream media were regulated, social media became the driver for the protests, giving particularly the youths the voice to challenge dominant power groups while at the same making it difficult for the power groups to clamp down on identified protest leaders (Uwalaka, 2019).

Although social media played a key role in the management of information in the run-up to the #occupyNigeria protests, Facebook accounted for the largest avenue for information and mobilisation for the protest as 82% of participants said it was the platform through which they learnt about the protests. Whatsapp comes next with 66%. Mainstream media of TV and radio accounted for 13% and newspapers

a mere 4%. Organisers used the Twitter hashtags #OccupyNigeria and #fuelsubsidy and the Facebook page 'Nationwide Anti-Fuel Subsidy Removal: Strategies and Protest' (NASSRSP) to advance their cause (Egbunike&Olorunnisola, 2015). Similarly, 85% of protesters say they used Facebook to plan and coordinate their participation in the protest. Again, WhatsApp comes next with 67% and YouTube the least with only 11%.

Shortly after the protests broke out, the Nigerian government expressed serious reservations about the protests and deployed soldiers to go to the street to quell the protests that were taking place simultaneously in several capitals including the nation's capital, Abuja, the nation's commercial centre, Lagos, amongst others. Two powerful trade unions, the National Labour Congress (NLC) and the Trades Union Congress (TUC) organised the protests (Zuckerman, 2012). Also, several national personalities and celebrities were active in the organisation of the protests and some took part in the protests, namely: Joe Odumakin, AchikeChude, AbiodunAremu, DeboAdeniran, Banky W, El Dee, Kate Henshaw, OmoniOboli, Bimbo Akintola, Desmond Elliot, UfomaEjenobor, RonkeOshodi-Oke (Schechter, 2012; Ogala&Ezeamalu, 2013).

2. #BringBackOurGirls

On 14 April 2014, 276 girls were kidnapped by Boko Haram fighters from Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Borno State in Nigeria. Chibok is majorly a Christian village, 80 miles south of Maiduguri, the capital city of Borno State (BBC, 2017; Omeni, 2017).

Soon after the tweeter hashtag #BringBackOurGirls (BBOG) movement was launched to create and sustain awareness about the missing girls both at the national as well as at the international levels.

It was a movement that drew attention to the suffering of the innocent girls in Boko haram camps. Many notable personalities and celebrities supported the solidarity movement including the then US president, Barack Obama, who sent a special military team to Nigeria to assess the situation, and advise and provide logistics to the Nigerian government on how to rescue the girls. The wife of Barack Obama, Michelle Obama, as well as other American celebrities such as Jason Statham, Harrison Ford, Kelsey Grammer, Wesley Snipes, Sylvester Stallone, Ronda Rousey, Mel Gibson, Simon Baker, Ricky Martin, Eva Longoria, Ashton Kutcher, Demi Moore, Ben Stiller, Justin Timberlake, Sean Combs, Kim Kardashian, Beyonce, Sean Penn, Alicia Keys, Ellen DeGeneres, Jamie Foxx, Amy Poehler, Anne Hathaway, and Malala Yousafzai actively supported the movement. The movement was so successful that even the leader of Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, released a video condemning the hashtag, an indication that Boko Haram was following the development and the publicity the hashtag was garnering (Plan International.org, 2015; Nwaubani, 2017). Indeed, Ojebode (2019) argued that no civil society group since the return of democracy in Nigeria in 1999 has accomplished as much through decent dissent as the Bring Back Our Girls (BBOG) group.

This success according to a non-governmental organisation, the Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR) reports that BBOG successfully used both Twitter and Facebook to

mobilise its followers and fans to organise its various activities. Between 1st January and May 2018, 1,200 Twitter accounts followed the group, resulting in a 5% increase in the group's Twitter community (Ojebode&Oladapo, 2018).

BBOG was a female-led movement that combined a hybrid online and offline strategy to drive its activism. Aisha Yesufu, Jeff Okoroafor, Obiageli Ezekwesili are among the prominent Nigerians who spearheaded the movement and due to the publicity, the movement attracted the Nigerian Government felt highly embarrassed and started a campaign of blackmail and harassment against the leaders.

To underscore the danger to the lives of the leading activists, one of its leaders, Aisha Yesufu, wrote in 2018 that the BBOG movement is “expensive in terms of mental and physical wellbeing, psychologically, emotionally, empathy and sacrifice one has to make daily coming out to demand #BringBackOurGirls. The cost of being attacked, not just by citizens, but also by the government” was real (Ojebode, 2018).

3. #ChildNotBride

The hashtag #ChildNotBride is an offshoot of the global "Girls Not Brides" campaign that was launched in 2011 by "The Elders", a group of independent global leaders working together for peace and human rights, as part of their efforts to draw more attention to and end the harmful practices of marrying out young girls as wives and thus cutting short their normal growth and maturity as adults because they are unable to choose whom to marry (Girls not brides.org, 2020). The campaign

encourages and empowers people to work to create a world without child marriage which Oladosu (2019) defines as “a forceful marriage of a girl under 18 years”.

Globally, there are over 650 million women alive today who were married as children, 140 million girls will marry before the age of 18 and another 50 million will marry before they turn 15 with reports indicating that “young girls who marry before the age of 18 have a greater risk of becoming victims of ultimate partner violence than those who married at an older age” (Oladosu, 2019).

The Girls Not Brides became an independent charity in 2013. Prominent among the global campaigners are Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mrs Graca Machel and Sonita Alizadeh. The Girls Not Brides is now a global partnership of more than 1300 civil society organisations from over 100 countries that are working and committed to ending child marriage and enabling girls to fulfil their potential (Girls, not brides.org, 2020).

In Nigeria, the child not bride campaign started in 2016 courtesy of the African Union but gained more popularity since 2019 since 23 million Nigerian girls are married before they turn 15 years of age (Oladosu, 2019). Also, “a girl who is married before the age of 18 is more likely to drop out of school, to become a child mother, to die during pregnancy or childbirth, trapped in a lifetime of poverty and also more likely to be psychologically and economically dependent on her husband and in-laws, and therefore unlikely to realise her true potential” (Plan

International, 2019). In 1018, three teenage friends Susan Ubogu, KudiratAbiola, and TemitayoAsuni founded the non-for-profit “Its Never Your Fault” with the aim of “achieving gender equality, empowering girls in our society and eradicating the social injustice they face such as child marriage, rape, and child abuse” (Plan International, 2019).

4. #RevolutionNow

On 5th August 2019, Mr Omoyele Sowore, a former presidential candidate in the 2019 presidential elections and publisher of Sahara Reporters, an online news outlet, with other activists organised the #RevolutionNow protest, to register the grievances of Nigerians against maladministration and misgovernance in Nigeria. The protests took place in 14 cities across the nation. However, squads of fully armed military personnel (police, army and air force) prevented the protests from successfully holding. Two days earlier, the convener of the protests, Mr Sowore was arrested. Sowore led an alliance of several civil society groups which included: The Coalition for Revolution (CORE), the Alliance for the Masses Political Alternative (AMPA) and the Take It Back (TIB) with five core demands, thus:(1) an economy that works for the masses, (2) an effective and democratic end to insecurity, (3) an end to systemic corruption and for total system change, (4) the immediate implementation of the N30,000 minimum wage and (5) free and quality education for all.

Attempts at Gagging Free Speech in Nigeria

The “trio” of Nigeria's Communications and Information Minister, Mr Lai Mohammed, the President's Special Adviser on Media and

Publicity, Mr Femi Adesina and the president's Senior Special Assistant (SSA) on media and publicity, Mr ShehuGaruba have been in the forefront of the onslaught against critical voices using press statements and tweets to press home the government's disapproval of the so-called “fake news” peddled by such voices. This has even led to the introduction of the “Hate Speech Bill” in 2019. Also, several attacks on journalists and prominent activists who dared to speak “against the Government position” have been recorded. Below are some of the statements on Facebook and Tweets that endanger the lives of activists. The implication of the above social media communication indicates the mindset of the government through its official spokespersons, using

<p>Mr Lai Mohammed, <i>Minister of Information and Culture</i></p>	<p>Mr Femi Adesina, <i>President's Special Adviser on Media and Publicity</i></p>	<p>Mr Shehu Garba, <i>Senior Special Assistant (SSA) on media and publicity</i></p>
<p>“We will not fold our arms to allow purveyors of fake news and hate speech to use social media to destabilise the country”</p> <p>-Lai Mohammed, Guardian Newspaper online (31 October 2020)</p> <p>“...one of the purveyors of fake news and disinformation during the EndSARS crisis was DJ Switch, real name Obianuju Catherine Udeh...Instead of presenting whatever evidence she may have to the Judicial Panel, she chose to escape from the country</p>	<p>A base fellow called BayoOluwasanmi has been using foul language against PMB, his female supporters, and myself. Now, he gets his comeuppance. Coming soon.</p> <p>@FcmAdesina, Apr 9, 2020</p> <p>The Northern Elders Forum led by Prof AngoAbdullahi had always been anti-Buhari. So there's nothing new in their antagonistic position. They backed a candidate in the 2019 election, and they all bit the dust together. Case of sour grapes.</p> <p>@FemAdesina, Feb 9, 2020</p>	<p>“Sowore was a rascal, who had used his newspaper to abuse all of us”</p> <p>-@GarShehu Jul 21, 2020</p> <p>“Sowore called for a revolution to overthrow the democratically elected government of Nigeria... No government will allow anybody to openly call for destabilization in the country and do nothing”</p> <p>-@GarShehu Dec 8, 2019</p>

<p>under the pretext that her life was in danger...Her conduct thus becomes suspect...In the fullness of time, this lady will be exposed for what she is, a fraud and a front for divisive and destructive forces..."</p>	<p>ShakaMomodu: A Columnist as Hater-in-Chief @FemAdesina, Feb 9, 2020</p>	
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psychological threats against persons whom they deem as threats to the government. Ironically, many of the issues, for which the government labelled the activists as "enemies" and "haters" of Nigeria were a mere exercise of the democratic rights of citizens to express their displeasure with government policies. Such policies are issues of systemic failure, lack of the enabling environment for citizens to express themselves and the use of government apparatus to intimidate and stifle opposition voices and critics.

Way forward for the Democratisation of Social Media Space in Nigeria

Based on the discussion above, Nigeria's democracy appears to be under threat. Mbaku (2020) has highlighted that democracy in Africa becomes endangered when citizens' civil liberties, free speech and a free press and political rights are not guaranteed and protected including the right to freely and peacefully protest. This right to free speech ought to be guaranteed and protected both in the physical and virtual space. While Nigerians have experienced restrictions in the expression of their rights to dissent by forcefully curtailing protests, Nigerians are, however, facing threats to their freedom of expression online including threats to

regulate social media as shown in the social media communication of government officials. Lai Mohammed, the Minister of Information and Culture (Agency Report, 2020) recently said.

We need a social media policy that will regulate what should be said and posted and what should not... We also need technology and resources to dominate our social media space... If you go to China, you cannot get Google, Facebook or Instagram but you can only use your email because they have made sure that it is regulated... In June this year, there was a riot in Ethiopia when a popular musician was killed... What Ethiopia did to curtail the crisis that followed was to shut down social media for two days.

These threats, not only to individual critical voices and activists but also to social media space, portend danger to Nigeria's democracy by gradually eroding democratic principles and replacing them with autocracy and dictatorship. To prevent this, the following steps need to be taken:

1. Respected Nigerian citizens must reject the Nigerian government's move to curtail freedoms in the physical and virtual spaces because they constitute essential ingredients of democracy.
2. Civil society groups must synergise and collaborate and hold the government accountable for abuses of fundamental human rights to freedom of expression.

3. The media, as the fourth estate of the realm, must be alert not to be allowed to be manipulated and used to further the government agenda to close the public space and stifle critical voices. They should also use all legal means, including redress in courts, to defend their responsibility to the citizens and protection of democratic rights.
4. Social Media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google+ amongst others should create avenues for citizens to continue to use their platforms to continue to express themselves freely without censorship. They should prevent the possibility of censorship by governments and if possible offer citizens alternative platforms to express themselves if autocratic governments try to censor social media. This may include the possibility of using their platforms offline if the internet is shut down by government agencies and regulators.

Conclusion

This essay establishes that social media critics and critical voices in Nigeria have become endangered. This is made possible through the different communication of government officials on social media, particularly via Facebook and Twitter. The essay shows that Nigerians are increasingly turning to social media to express and mobilise themselves since the physical space is under constant attacks and threats. Nigerians have used social media to successfully execute movements such as #OccupyNigeria, #BringBackOurGirls, #ChildNotBride and #RevolutionNow. The article shows the different

ways the Nigerian government endeavours to gaggle social media critical voices on social media and the danger that such stifling of critical voices portends for democracy in Nigeria, namely the tendency to turn Nigeria into an autocracy and a dictatorship. We examined the essential role of social media in democracy and how the rhetoric of the concept of "fake news" has been twisted to suit the intention of the users, particularly the Nigerian government and its officials, away from the original understanding of the concept.

The study shows that freedom of speech is a prized value in Nigeria's democracy and that includes the voices that are critical of the government and its activities. Such critical voices have a place in Nigeria's democracy and they should not be threatened in any way that gives the impression that freedom of speech is being gagged.

Government officials are to see their primary role as that of 'attacking critical voices' or 'opponents'. Rather, they should understand their responsibility as explanatory, which is explaining to Nigerians the activities of the government even if they are not able to convince a section of the Nigerian society. Democracy in Nigeria can only be deepened or enhanced if and only if both critical and non-critical voices are allowed to co-exist side by side.

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