SOCIAL MEDIA AND CONFLICTS ON THE MAMBILLA PLATEAU: A REVIEW

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Abstract

Taraba State has been engulfed by the trend of conflicts since its creation in 1991. It has witnessed series of religious clashes between Muslims and Christians, farmers-herders violence, communal crises, banditry, kidnappings, armed robbery and political crises that have killed thousands of people and displaced tens of thousands. These conflicts and crimes have political, religious, and ethnic tones. Mambilla Plateau, situated in Taraba State, witnessed several conflicts right from pre-colonial, colonial, and post-independent eras. In all the conflicts on the Plateau, communication has been a critical element in the escalation or control of the conflict. Many scholars had variously accused social media as a vehicle for disseminating wrong or fake information. This paper used review to examine how fake news and hate speech can escalate or de-escalate the conflict. The paper found out from the reviewed literature that social media can be easily used to propagate fake news and hate speech, especially during a crisis or political campaign. Hence, fake news, hate speech and rumour cannot be dismissed from escalating the 2017/2018 Mambilla Plateau conflicts. The study recommends that social media should be regulated to avoid its excesses that can lead to conflict.

Keywords: Social Media, Conflict, Fake News, Hate Speech, Crisis.

INTRODUCTION

Taraba State has been engrossed in conflicts since its creation in 1991 (Rachael & Evelyn, 2018). The state has witnessed series of religious clashes between Muslims and Christians, farmers-herders violence, communal crises, banditry, kidnappings, armed robbery and political crises that have killed thousands of people and displaced tens of thousands. Mambilla Plateau, situated in Taraba State, has witnessed several conflicts right from the pre-colonial, colonial, post-independent to even the present era.

According to Ngoh (1979), and Lenshie and Yakubu (2014), Mambilla Plateau was once part of the Northern Cameroon Trust Territory under the United Republic of Cameroon. This Trust Territory passed through the hands of Germans, British and French from 1884-1961. Germany ruled the Trust Territory from 1884-1915 and in 1916 the United Republic of Cameroon was divided between Britain and France following the defeat of the Germans in 1916. The French Cameroon or East Cameroon was under French administration from 1916-

1960, while Britain administered the British Cameroon or West and Northern Cameroon from 1916-1961.

Mambilla Plateau and other provinces like Dikwa North, Dikwa Central and Gwoza of the present Borno State, Madagali/Chubunawa, Mubi, Chamba and Toungo of the current Adamawa State, Gashaka and United Hills of the present Taraba State respectively were part of the Northern Cameroon under the League of Nations from 1919-1945 (Ngoh, 1979; Lenshie & Yakubu, 2014).

After the Second World War, Mambilla Plateau and other provinces were handled by Britain as a Trusteeship Territory of the United Nations from 1945 till plebiscite of 1959-1961 (Ngoh, 1979; Lenshie & Yakubu, 2014). The history of this area is, therefore, crisis-ridden.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND FAKE NEWS

Social Media has become so important that it has engaged the attention of many scholars. According to Raj (2013), Rodman (2012), and Holliman and Curtis (2013), the series of developments in the area of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the subsequent emergence of the Internet have huge impacts on humans and societies - from education to culture, business to the economy, family to social life, politics to Government, arts to journalism, health to sports. Beyond, the role of the ICTs and the Internet is evident and invaluable. This makes the Internet a digital convergence of other media such as books, newspapers, magazines, movies, radio, recording and television to understand the media of the future to be very important.

According to Pavlik and McIntosh (2004), Thakur (2007), Flew (2008), Sutcu and Oztermiyeci (2011), Abana (2018), and Rodman (2012), the term convergence in social media means the interlinking of computing and ICTs, communication networks and media content within the realm of computers, telephones, and technologies that has occurred with the development and polorisation of the Internet, and the convergent products, services and activities; which have emerged in the digital media space that are inherently adaptable, delivered on intelligent platforms, applications and devices.

A number of empirical studies have been conducted in this area. Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) (2019) researched Nigeria's 'fake news' eco-system on online information landscape to paint a clearer picture of how information flows adopting secondary online social media sites, analyzing Facebook and Twitter, with some data collection and fact-checking through

WhatsApp. The findings revealed that the three online media: www.spynigeria.com/ng, www.observerstimes.com, and www.sojworld.com were just one domain changing form to share fake news.

Also contributing to sharing of disinformation, Wasserman et al. (2020) conducted a research adopting FGD and Interview methods to research on some audience motivations for sharing dis- and misinformation: A comparative study in five sub-Saharan African countries (Kenya, Namibia, Nigeria, South Africa and Zimbabwe). The research focused on motivations for sharing of fake news and hate speech on politics through WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, You Tube, Snap chat, and Social Influencers amongst others, without recourse to fact checkers. The findings showed that in all the countries people share fake news both consciously and unconsciously especially political news that is in favour of their candidates and news that is tarnishing the image of the candidates that they do not like.

Equally contributing to disinformation research, Hassan and Hitchen (2020) researched on "Driving division? disinformation and the new media landscape in Nigeria adopting interviews, FGD and secondary sources. The report published by CDD (2020) focused on stakeholders in six states representing Nigeria's geo-political zones, social media monitoring by CDD on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. It revealed that as at 2019, there were over 122 million Nigerians using the Internet and that as at 2020 Nigeria is now more divided than it has ever been and a big chunk of what drives this is misinformation on the social media. There are clear indications of media overlap from social media by conventional media with example of Africa Independent Television (AIT). In the run-up to the 2019 election, the station ran the "Kakaaki Socials", a ten-minute social media segment as part of its flagship morning programme. In it, they shared user generated content - including pictures and memes - from social media to discuss current political issues without first verifying their accuracy.

The study also illustrates an example of false content created and shared on social media, and how it can, to a large extent, shape print, television and radio content. One respondent noted that when rumours emerged that President Buhari was about to marry a new wife, many traditional media houses carried the story. the study also highlights the desire for virality among traditional media operators, which is a feature of social media platforms.

Ogbette, Idam, Kareem, and Daniel (2019) and Auwal (2018) researched into social media, fake news and hate speech in Nigeria: causes, effects and

management, using documented secondary sources. The two studies revealed that the major causes of fake news are: quest for relevance, hostile government and civil actors, poor regulation/ of the internet and money making. The effect of this is what results to different crises in Nigeria.

HATE SPEECH

Scholars that conducted researches on hate speech include Martin-Rozumiłowicz and Kužel (2019), who conducted research on Social Media, misinformation and Electoral Integrity as IFES Working Paper using literature review and secondary sources. The findings revealed that online disinformation does violate the Article's provision as government is yet to explore a way out of this through legislation.

Equally, Dabugat and Ibrahim (2015) in their research on rural banditry and hate speech in Northern Nigeria: Fertile ground for the construction of dangerous narratives in the media using FGD and Secondary data revealed that there is a diverse body of literature that covers the subjects of hate speech and media discourse, and how they are related to actual acts of violence. It also revealed that there are other terms with meanings and usages related to hate speech such as 'extreme speech', which can be used to describe a wide variety of expressions such a 'holocaust', 'denial', 'extreme pornography', and speech inciting hatred or likely to provoke public disorder'; 'sedition' and such publication of 'false scandalous, and malicious writing have the intent to defame and chance of catalyzing or amplifying violence by one group against another. The findings further showed that the media make some derogatory statements like "Southern Kaduna Christians", 'antagonists', who commit all sorts of dehumanizing crimes, including looting, arson, killing, and rape, 'church leaders', 'church buildings', 'mosques', 'non-indigene muslims', 'heavily armed Fulani jihadists', 'one Fulani group Miyetti Allah' amongst others. These statements trigger reprisal attacks by opponent groups.

CONFLICTS: RURAL BANDITRY AND CATTLE RUSTLING

Contributing to rural banditry, Egwu (2015) explains that rural banditry refers to stealing cattle and animals from herders or the raiding of cattle from the ranches. He further asserts that rural banditry and cattle rustling are caused by the decline in human security and state capacity and the poverty level in the society.

Mohammed and Alimba (2015) observe that rural banditry and cattle rustling impact negatively on herders because they suffer most as their wealth is tied to their animals and these animals are victims of the banditry and rustling.

According to Pate and Oso (2017), conflict can simply be a mere disagreement. But if such disagreement is not well managed, it could turn to violent conflict where injuries are inflicted on human beings or animals which could lead to loss of lives and properties.

Relating conflict to the Nigerian situation, they explain that most of the violent conflicts that occur in Nigeria are products of poisoned perceptions about one another by individuals within their group settings. This presupposes that addressing the issue of violent conflicts must involve targeting the perceptual problems of individuals. Respecting federalism, state creation, local government administration, introduction of quota system, NYSC, citing of institutions of higher learning, opening up of roads and airports all over the country, development of national media institutions, establishment of federal government agencies in all nooks and crannies of the country are specific measures to reduce tension among the various regions.

Situating conflict to Mambilla Plateau, Jean (1998), Lenshie and Johnson (2012) observe that the most of the conflicts that occurred on the Mambilla Plateau, including the 2017/2018 herders/farmers conflict, are caused by land disputes.

Contributing to rural banditry and farmers/herders conflict research, Kuna and Ibrahim (2015) looked at multiple variables driving banditry and how the phenomenon has become more complex in rural communities of Northern Nigeria over time and found that the country is faced with violence associated with the collapse of governance and absence of law and order in rural Nigeria which gave rise to a hospitable environment for banditry in the country in the last decade.

The findings further revealed that these conflicts often result in high human and economic cost, ranging from the sexual assault of women and girls, attacks on villages, to cattle rustling, amongst others as can be noticed in Benue, Plateau, Niger, Kwara, Nassarawa, Zamfara, Kaduna, Sokoto, Kebbi, Kano, Delta, Enugu, Ondo, Oyo and Ebonyi states.

Mohammed and Alimba (2015) researched into the social impact of rural banditry adopting descriptive research and using Taraba and Kaduna states in Nigeria. Taraba State is located in the North-Eastern part of Nigeria, while Kaduna State is situated in the North-Western part. The findings showed that banditry impacts negatively on occupational groups differently, with farmers, herders and traders suffering most in communities. Agricultural activities are negatively impacted by banditry as farming is disrupted for several farming cycles while herders suffer

most, as their wealth is tied to their animals. It was also found that banditry led to the disruption of school calendars, forcing prolonged school closures.

CONFLICTS: HERDERS/FARMERS CONFLICTS

Egwu (2015) notes that herders/farmers conflicts are mainly caused by pressure on land and water resources caused by the combined effects of land grabbing, climate change and environmental decline, the failure of government grazing reserves policy over the years, and the disappearance of designated cattle routes while Mohammed and Alimba (2015) explain that herders/farmers conflicts negatively affect both herders and farmers and occupational groups differently. For farmers, agricultural activity is negatively impacted by conflict as farming is disrupted for several farming cycles. At the same time, herders also suffer because such conflicts deny them the opportunity to graze their animals effectively. For both farmers and herders, such conflicts disrupt school calendars, forcing prolonged school closures.

Rachael and Evelyn. (2018) researched on historical analysis of the effects of herders/farmers Conflict in Taraba State using secondary documented evidence, discussion and interaction with people. The findings showed that most of the conflicts in Nigeria are said to be caused by various factors such as climate change, poverty, unemployment, land tenure issue, and group identity while struggling for power in the primitive accumulation process.

Researching on pastoral transhumance and dynamics of social conflict in Nasarawa State, North-Central Nigeria adopting FGD, Chukwuma (2015) revealed that the volatile state of affairs on her transhumance corridors and routes has been a product of sociological dialectics, which has been complicated by the intermix of climate, politics, ecology, demography like population explosion, governance, identity (religion, ethnicity), economy, and criminality. The dire impacts of this crisis on human life and property, agricultural productivity, livelihood, national sustainability, peaceful co-existence and intergroup relations hold strategic implications for national security in Nigeria.

Omotola and Hassan (2015) conducted research on Herders and Farmers associations and social conflicts in Northern Nigeria, adopting a descriptive qualitative survey research design, supplemented by historical analysis using two organizations for in-depth study and empirical illustrations: the Miyeti Allah Cattle Breeders Association (MACBAN), the umbrella socio-cultural group of the Fulani's herders in Nigeria, and the All Farmers Association of Nigeria (AFAN), the equivalent farmers' organization.

The findings showed that in most cases relations between MACBAN and AFAN are abysmal; in many other instances relations are entirely non-existent because power play and lack of trust between the two lead to their inability to effectively mediate, check and diffuse rural banditry and social conflicts for sustainable development.

Akerjiir (2018) studied the increasing Farmers-Herders conflict in Nigeria: An assessment of the clashes between the Fulani herdsmen and indigenous farmers in Ukpabi-Nimbo community Enugu State using a qualitative research approach, Participant observation and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs). The Findings reveal that various factors such as soil-erosion caused by the change in climate, destruction of farmlands caused by cattle grazing done by the Fulani herdsmen, cattle rustling, and cattle theft done by gangs and groups called "Malaysian Boys" who are also raping and using the situation in the community to terrorize the people are responsible for the escalation of conflicts in the area while government response to the conflict is slow as security forces are deployed to conflict areas after an attack has been carried out.

CONFLICTS ON THE MAMBILLA PLATEAU

Lenshie and Johnson's (2012) work on ethnicity and citizenship crisis on the Mambilla Plateau using documented secondary sources found that despite the similarities of all ethnic groups living on the Plateau who speak Bantu, Semi Bantu and Senegambia language (Mambilla, Kaka, Kambu and Panso- Bantu and Semi Bantu classic as well as Fulani- Senegambia), inter-ethnic relationship has been played down by elite's manipulation of ethnicity and citizenship. The elites propagate this through the social media by exploiting proximate causes of conflict such as poverty, unemployment, land tenure issue, group identity while struggling for power in the primitive accumulation process.

Ngarka, Abdulsalam, Danburam (2018) research on the effects of plebiscites on the peoples of Mambilla Plateau, Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State 1959-2002 using historical documented analysis. It revealed that the plebiscites had placed the people to face psychological challenges of nativity and nationality rights and sense of belonging.

Sale (2018) researched on the conflicts between Fulani pastoralists and cultivators in Taraba State: The case of the Mambilla Plateau using descriptive qualitative content analysis discourse with political economy as the theoretical framework. The study revealed that the conflicts have economic, political, religious and ethnic colourations.

Types of conflicts on the Mambilla Plateau

According to Blench in Lenshie and Johnson (2012), history reveals that series of conflicts have occurred on the Mambilla Plateau in Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State. These conflicts were caused by the dispute over occupying the area by colonial masters, land, ethnicity or political factors. On conflicts of occupying the area and other provinces, the colonizers of the then Trust Territory where Mambilla Plateau is inclusive like Germany, Britain and France had colonial wars to occupy the area before Germany was defeated in 1916 (Ngoh, 1979).

Politically, Ngoh (1979), and Lenshie and Johnson (2012) stated that political factors started at the twilight of the plebiscite of 1959 and 1961 when the then British Trust Territory (including Mambilla Plateau) voted to be part of Nigeria. The plebiscite conflict resulted from each ethnic group living on the Mambilla Plateau struggling to gain political relevance over others. According to Lenshie and Johnson (2012), this was followed by the 1979 political conflict which raised ethnic tension on the Plateau. The later elections were also believed to be causes to some of the crises. According to Rachael and Evelyn (2018), the last two elections of 2015 and 2019 (both presidential and gubernatorial) in Taraba State also contributed to the 2016, 2017 and 2018 conflicts between herders and farmers on the Mambilla Plateau.

Jean (1998) observes that land conflicts started around the 1970s as a result of the population explosion and uncontrolled growth of livestock followed by high competition for land between grazers and farmers. The disputes mainly were between herders and farmers dating back to 1923 (Lenshie & Johnson, 2012). These conflicts and increase in the number of casualties are continuously threatening peaceful coexistence on the Plateau.

In all the conflicts on the Plateau, communication has been a critical element that helped to escalate or control the conflict. Many scholars like Ball (2017), UNESCO (2019), Adamu (2018), Rachael and Evelyn (2018), and Vanguard (2018) had variously accused social media of disseminating wrong or fake information and hate speech because social media lacks refined gate keeping process, hence, aid in creating and escalating crisis. This cannot be completely detached from the social media presentation of the 2017/2018 Mambilla Plateau crisis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is The Gatekeeping Theory. According to Folarin (2006), gatekeeping process amounts to a screening of the information to be disseminated. That means communicating some themes and suppressing others. The "screening" can occur at several levels in the media house hierarchy: the reporter, editor or publisher. In print as in electronic newsrooms, the processing starts with the reporter rewriting his/her own report for submission at the sub-desk, where the news copy may be completely reworked to make it conform to house policy, which in essence translates to the publisher's or proprietor's world-view.

Kunczick (1988) reported that at *TIME M*agazine, all reports filed in by correspondents were totally reworked to ensure that the news reflected company interests. Gate keeping to them is not just a matter of accepting or rejecting information, but also of processing, modifying, shaping, displaying, etc. of the accepted messages. Through this "filtering" process, gatekeepers decide which occurrences come to public awareness through ethical responsibility and social responsibility.

This theory becomes necessary since the postings of irritating pictures and videos on the Facebook and WhatsApp platforms are unregulated because of the lack of the gatekeeping process of Social Media.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Some online media just have one domain changing form to share fake news. People share fake news both consciously and unconsciously, especially political news favouring their candidates and tarnishing the image of the candidates they do not like. The build-up to the 2019 election left Nigeria more divided than ever because of the chunk of fake news and hate speech driven by social media because of the lack of gatekeeping. This could be because the Government is yet to explore legislation regulating social media excesses, which people associate. Most of the conflicts in Nigeria are caused by various factors such as climate change, poverty, unemployment, land tenure issue, group identity while struggling for power in the primitive accumulation process. The study recommends that:

1. Government should use dialogue and consultation to establish grazing fields and outlaw open grazing of cattle for mutual benefits.
2. Government should settle Fulani nomads by improving the nomadic education system so that their children can appreciate peaceful co-existence in society.

3. Government should assist farmers with farming tools and incentives to uplift them from traditional subsistence farming to modern mechanized farming practices to reduce environmental degradation.
4. Government should strengthen institutions engaged in preventing and resolving conflicts and assisting those displaced by conflicts in Taraba State and the nation.
5. Government should come up with a regulation to regulate the excesses of social media.

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