

Nature of Tweets in the 2015 Nigerian Presidential Elections

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ABSTRACT

Social media is becoming increasingly important as a means for social engagement. In Nigeria, Twitter is employed to convey opinion and make commentary on matters ranging from football to politics. Tweets are also used to inform, advocate, recruit and even incite. Previous studies have shown that Twitter could be effective for political mobilization. However, there is dearth of research on how Twitter has been used as a purveyor of neutral and/or hate speech in the Nigerian context. This study examined the nature of tweets in the immediate aftermath of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria. The authors employed content analysis of 250 purposively selected tweets from the #Igbo hashtag which trended between March 29 and 31, 2015. The tweets were then categorized into five explicit hate and one neutral tweet category respectively. Results revealed the dominance of three hate tweet types: derogatory, mocking and blaming. These findings were then discussed bearing in mind earlier theories on the functionality of tweets and voting patterns from an analysis of the election results.

Keywords: 2015 Presidential Election, Ethnocentric Tweets, Hate Speech, Igbo, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Hate Speech and Social Media

New developments, especially in information science and technology, have had major impacts in the world we live in. They have broadened the scope and rapidity of our communication capacities and thereby narrowed the lines of divide between continents, countries and communities. They broadened our access to knowledge and opened the doors of communication beyond the wildest dreams of the generation before us. But these technologies are also two edged swords whose capacities and potentials for positive uses are in most cases directly proportional to their capacity/potential for abuse and misuse. And such evidence of potential for abuse and misuse are

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there for us to see especially with the growing incidence of cybercrimes, identity theft, malware invasions and use of these technologies for misinformation, disinformation, incitements and propaganda. It is these last aspects of abuse and misuse that interest us in this paper as we shall be examining how the internet, through social media, could be used to vehicle incitements and propaganda in the form of hate speeches.

The internet, the most visible exemplar of the new information superhighway, is a broad, neutral and new communication technology (Wachanga, 2011). Web 2.0, especially social media, might be a neutral tool but certainly not an innocent media. It can and has been used for good and for bad. Thus whereas Facebook and SMS have been used to spread social messages, build advocacy platforms, educate and entertain people, the same Facebook and SMS were employed in spreading ethnic hatred after the Kenyan elections in 2007 (Njoroge, Kimani and Kikech, 2011; Makinen and Kuira, 2008).

The social media was not politically innocent. Although some blogs aimed to promote peace and justice, others were used as channels for biased information, tribal prejudices and hate speech. The online sphere may foster the formation and strengthening of like-minded people, and add to the fragmentation of opinions and views rather than building compromises. Many bloggers took sides and the discussion could be ethnically tense. Similarly, while SMS has been a powerful tool for good during and after the elections, it was also used to spread rumours and messages laden with ethnic hatred. (Makinen and Kuira, 2008:334)

Hate speech, our interest in this paper, is any expression that causes harm to, or denigrates a person (Boeckmann and Turipin-Petrosino, 2010). The intent to hurt is inherent in any conceptualization of hate speech. Hate speech is characterized by “a difference that compels the speaker to draw a sharp distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’”. Based on these differences, members of outside groups are delegitimized, demonized or depicted as inferior” (Vollhardt et al, 2007). Using anti-Semitic campaigns that occurred in Poland in 1968, Vollhart et al constructed the essential characteristics of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ difference in hate speech. The other is presented as a foreigner and as such described as disloyal. This gives rise to social categorizations like mistrust, irrational fear and discrediting the other. Hate speech builds on existing or pre-convinced stereotypes and this makes audiences more vulnerable to accept them, use them and serve as a trigger to hate crimes. In other words, the ‘other’ is a prerequisite for hate speech since the prejudice has to be targeted at one who is different from self. Meddaugh and Kay (2010:262) offer a categorization of the ‘other’ as: tyrannical, genocidal, inferior, a false martyr and a manipulator. The social construct of ‘us’ vs. ‘other’ is essential for any discourse of hate speech.

However, while these hate speech categorizations have remained more or less constant over time and space, the media platforms for the propagation of hate speech have morphed over time. The radio was used in the Rwandan genocide (Ilibagiza and Erwin, 2006). Radio and television played a historical role in inciting the ethnic wars of Burundi, Rwanda and the eastern parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Vollhardt et al, 2007) while newspapers were employed in the Soweto killings (Olorunnisola and Martin, 2013). Social media as an Internet based media has been described as a “force multiplier” of hate speech (Daniels, 2008:132).

This reality of the internet and its users as a force multiplier of hate speech can be very jolting as it conflicts with our typical image of the internet user which is that of an educated, critical and knowledge seeking citizen of the world. Sadly, expectations have not always matched harsh reality as some netizens (citizens of the internet) have become the tools for spreading hate after traditional media was banned in the aftermath of the 2007 Kenyan election. Nonetheless, discussions on this rising profile of the once hidden voices – the citizens of the internet – seem

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