



## Social Media Use for Decision Making During Politics in a Multicultural Society: a Case Study of Nigeria

Woyopwa Shem<sup>1\*</sup>, Sarah Gambo<sup>2</sup>, Billy Graham<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>University of Abuja, Abuja, Nigeria

<sup>3</sup>Adamawa State Polytechnic, Yola, Nigeria

### Abstract

*This study explored the use of social media for decision-making during politics in a multicultural society. The study was anchored on the public sphere theory and was guided by three research objectives, which are to probe the role of social media in building an inclusive society, investigate the role of social media in making an informed citizenry that deepens democracy, and identify the challenges that confront the practice of social media in a multicultural society. The study adopted a qualitative approach where secondary data from extant empirical studies were collated, presented, and analyzed. The study's findings revealed that using social media platforms is a veritable tool to adopt during politics and that these platforms influence citizens' political decisions. However, the study's findings also revealed that social media faces challenges during politicking, especially in a multicultural society like Nigeria. Some of the identified challenges include the proliferation of misinformation, fake news, and hate speech, among other forms of practices that are damaging to a multicultural and democratic society. The paper, therefore, recommends, among other things, that there is a swift need for stakeholders and other relevant government agencies to educate netizens on the dangers of using social media adversely during politics.*

**Keywords:** social media, multicultural society, politics, decision-making, influence.

**Paper type:** Research paper

**\*Corresponding author:** shem.woyopwa@yahoo.com

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## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is one of the African countries blessed with a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-religious populace. The country has over 200 million people (National Population Commission, 2022), over 300 ethnic groups, and over 400 lingua-cultural groupings (Olanrewaju, Loromeke, Adekoye, 2017). Both linguistically and culturally, Nigeria is a diverse country (Olagbaju, 2020).

The multi-ethnic and multicultural nature of Nigeria has, over time, caused the country a lot of setbacks in the area of electing credible and reliable leaders as ethnic, regional, and even religious sentiments become the core determinant of who is elected as a governor, senator, or president (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). The above situation has, over the years, nurtured and strengthened bad leadership and other corrupt practices in Nigeria.

According to Nwozor (2014), the multi-ethnic nature of Nigerian society has, over the years, affected how the country's media reports political subjects. More often than not, one would easily envisage if a media outfit belongs to a Hausa Northerner or a Yoruba Easterner in how such media outfits cover and report political issues. Findings of a study conducted by Nwammuo, Nwachukwu, and Iwok, (2015) supported the above claim when their study revealed conclusively that in the coverage of issues, specifically the 2015 elections, the newspapers owned by politicians reflected the dominant interests and views of their financiers in their political reports.

From the preceding, it is, therefore, apposite to infer that there are chances that Nigerians no longer have confidence in the conventional media, especially media outfits owned and managed by politicians. Nevertheless, the advent of social media platforms presents a rare opportunity for citizens to comment and respond on political issues, and this has, over the years, shaped the nature of political awareness among citizens. Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) corroborate that the invention of social media has altered how political issues are communicated across the globe, including in Nigeria. Politicians, political parties, charities, organizations, and think tanks are adopting social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, as new channels for reaching out to people.

Shreds of evidence from extant literature revealed that social media are veritable tools for promoting political discourse in a democratic state like Nigeria despite its diverse nature (Pwashikai & Shem, 2019). The above view was

supported by Apuke and Tunca (2018) when they stated that social media use for political campaigns and electioneering in Nigeria has increased tremendously. For instance, because of the participatory character of social media, Facebook was used in the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. It served as a forum for organizing political campaigns, electioneering campaigns, ideological trumpeting events, and voter mobilization (Apuke & Tunca, 2018).

The power of social media in making political decisions in Nigeria was demonstrated during various advocacy and political campaigns in Nigeria. For instance, social media was used vehemently in the Edo 2022 governorship election, and the outcomes of that gubernatorial election are instructive and affirm the fact that the godfatherism effect in Nigeria is in the decline (Ngonso & Chikwu, 2022). Suffice it to say that social media has the potency to shape and strengthen the Nigerian political sphere if these platforms are harnessed aptly. It is in light of the above that this paper seeks to critically examine the role of social media use in decision-making during politics in a multicultural ambience like Nigeria, considering the power relations as they unfold in Nigerian politics.

The broad objective of this study is to investigate the social media use for decision-making during politics in a multicultural society: A case study of Nigeria. The specific objectives are to:

1. Probe the role of social media in building an inclusive society.
2. Investigate the role of social media in building an informed citizenry that deepens democracy.
3. Identify the challenges that confront the practice of social media in a multicultural society.

Shreds of literature abound in corpora on the concept of social media and its contribution to politics in a democratic and multicultural ambience like Nigeria. In light of the above, this section reviewed some of these extant shreds of literature for clarity and comprehension.

The concept of social media as a concept has a gamut of definitions. In other words, over the years, scholars from the fields of communication and media studies, sociology, and political science, among other related fields, have tried to conceptualize social media; however, despite the efforts of these scholars, there is

no single universally accepted definition of the term social media. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p.6) described social media as “groups of Internet-based applications that are founded on the ideological and technological underpinnings of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-created content. The above implies that social media platforms are interactive applications that permit their users to create, share, and access information on diverse issues. Edwards & Hoeffler (2010) expound that it’s due to the interactive capabilities of social media that they are sometimes known as Web 2.0; hence, they should not be confused with the World Wide Web, which does not support interactions. The above definition provides a crystal distinction between social media and the World Wide Web.

According to Carr and Hayes (2015), social media are "internet-based channels that enable users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences to derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others." The above definition expounds that social media users derive certain gratification whenever they utilize social media platforms. Perhaps the gratification Carr and Hayes (2015) were referring to is the informative, interactive, instantaneous, and influential nature of social media platforms.

In his opinion, Mayfield (2008) views social media as an online avenue that encourages engagement, transparency, dialogue, and connectivity. The above definition outlines three features that qualify social media to serve as a viable tool in governance and politics. Firstly, Mayfield pinpointed that social media platforms can encourage engagement; in other words, these platforms are capable of mobilizing and galvanizing citizens/electorates/citizens to participate in political activities and processes. Secondly, Mayfield's definition also unraveled that social media platforms also encouraged transparency; in other words, users of these platforms could hold officials from both the private and public sectors accountable whenever they deviate from the core principles that guide their professional conduct. From the foregoing, it is therefore apt to infer that the interactive and liberal nature of social media qualifies these platforms to be used for both advocacy and political campaigns. Social media is germane in the area of electioneering campaigns to mobilize and galvanize the electorate.

The concept of politics is dynamic; hence, its conceptualization becomes problematic sometimes. Modebadze (2010) substantiates Politics is defined

differently at different times and in different places. The scholar further stated that when we attempt to define the term "politics," we have a lot of difficulties because there are several definitions of politics that are all recognized by the law. In other words, there are a lot of genuine and acceptable definitions for the phrase. Politics, then, is a loaded phrase. Even well-known authorities cannot agree on the topic. Suffice it to say that politics lacks the consistent technical vocabulary that the natural sciences do, as well as an acceptable and accurate lexicon with terms that have recognizable meanings. However, this paper presented a reasonable number of diverse perspectives on what politics entails and provided an operational definition within the framework of the paper.

Politics was defined by Lasswell (1936) as "the process of who gets what, when, and how." The definition's language is so straightforward that it may be easily brushed aside as meaningless if not seen through the lens of political science (Dibia, nd). Dibia (n.d) further notes politics may also be described as the process by which political power is obtained, not for one's self-interest but rather for the benefit of the rule of law to accomplish the common good, which satisfies the wants and ambitions of all the peoples of society. The above definition contradicts the reality obtainable within the Nigerian political sphere because, more often than not, Nigerian politicians embezzle public funds and use them for their personal needs.

According to Dung (2018), political activities are referred to as politics, which is derived from the Greek term "polis," which signifies the city-state. Politics are the actions of a large-scale civilized social group since the city-state involves such a group (Dung, 2018). The above implies that politics is the collection of actions related to group decision-making or other types of inter-person power dynamics, such as the allocation of resources or status (Leftwich, 2015).

To Dyke (1994), Politics is a contest between individuals who have divergent goals regarding public affairs. The above implies that whenever there is a contest between two or more persons to achieve a particular goal, then politics is in place. In other words, when Mr. A and Mr. B are vying for an elective or appointed position, then that's politics. The above definition seems to be shallow yet straightforward for a layman to easily understand politics. This is because

politics is beyond just vying for a position; it involves a gamut of activities, as pinpointed in the definitions reviewed above.

Modebadze (2010) thought that politics may be summed up as the study of the state, its goals, and institutions for achieving them, as well as its interactions with its citizens and other states. The above definition seems to be in tandem with the earlier reviewed definitions. However, the definition seems to be quite distinct because the author sees politics from the institutional perspective where the state, through the art of governance and interaction, influences its citizens and other countries.

Open Education Sociology Dictionary (n.d) sees politics as the practice of using one's authority to influence others, which involves both decision-makers and the institutions (such as the government, judicial system, military, and police) that enforce laws based on those choices. The above definition views politics from the lens of authority and influence. Suffice it to say that politics as a concept is all about power and influence.

Haven reviewed all the above definitions; this paper provides an operational definition thus: politics within the framework of this paper is defined as a series of activities deployed by politicians, spin doctors, and all sorts of political actors to influence people's decisions by persuading them to gain their support. In other words, politics involves a battle for control and leadership between opposing interest groups or people (especially in the government); this is achieved through the use of media (both conventional and new media).

Despite the gamut of theories that abound in corpora, the researchers deem it apposite to build this study of the public sphere theory due to its suitability and nexus with the subject matter explored. The public sphere theory was propounded by Jurgen Habermas. The theory, according to Alakali, Faga, and Mbursa (2017), cited in Pali, Shamsu, and Shem (2020), envisioned the public sphere as a space where citizens have unrestricted access to information about issues of general interest, based on freedoms of assembly, association, expression, and publication of ideas without excessive economic or political control.

According to the Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP), the core concept behind the public sphere is to encourage participatory approaches to democracy. The public sphere is the setting where people congregate, talk, ponder, and ultimately develop ideas about public issues.

Suffice it to say that the public sphere arena is an ambiance where citizens can deliberate and decide on diverse political issues.

From the foregoing, it is clear that public sphere theory was founded on the libertarian philosophy, and social media platforms are exact replicas of the theory's fundamental principles because they impose little to no control (Pali Shamsu & Shem, 2020). Suffice it to say the liberal and interactive nature of social media platforms automatically qualifies the platforms to serve as an ambiance for the public to discuss and deliberate on who to vote for and why they should vote for such a candidate during electioneering campaigns. Social media also have the potency to accommodate public complaints about elected leaders who do not represent their constituents aptly. For instance, in recent times, there have been Facebook groups created with the sole aim of deliberating on the 2023 Nigerian general elections.

## **METHODS**

This study solely relied on the documentary review method. According to Payne and Payne, cited in Ahmed (2010), documentary methods are utilized for investigating and categorizing written documents. Agbo, Lenshie, & Boye (2018) expound that "The use of documentary research method requires careful and systematic study and analysis of documented sources based on written texts, visuals, and pictorial data which may be based on secondary data". Bailey (1994), cited in Ahmed (2010), says the documentary research method entails the analysis of documents that contain information about the phenomenon that one wishes to study.

In light of the above, the researchers used Google Scholar to retrieve relevant studies to explore the subject matter under investigation. It is pertinent to note that the following phrases and terms were used to search for relevant studies: social media, political participation, politics in a multicultural society, and the influence of social media in decision-making during politics. After a series of searches, more than 120 research papers were downloaded by the researchers. Notwithstanding, 23 research articles met the inclusion criteria based on the

purpose of this current study. The 23 published articles that met the inclusion criteria were thoroughly read and analyzed.

Social media and politics in a multicultural society: Using Nigeria as a Paradigm. The invention of social media has revolutionized human society in diverse ways. Lately, the impact of social media platforms is felt in almost every stratum of human endeavor. Suffice it to say that social media plays a tremendous role in the educational sector, economic sector, and even in the area of governance and politics. The political and democratic relevance of social media platforms in a multicultural society like Nigeria qualifies these platforms to be called the "fifth estate of the realm". In other words, after the judiciary, legislature, executive, and conventional media, social media occupy a strategic and influential position in a democratic society, considering the power it exercises in mobilizing and galvanizing citizens during political activities.

In recent years, the use of only conventional media for a political campaign has gradually become an old-fashioned practice; however, the reliance of politicians on mainstream media for political campaigns, according to Ikem (2011) cited in Ezebuenyi, Ezegwu, and Onuigbo, (2014) will undoubtedly be evident and cannot be fully disregarded. Ekwueme and Folarin (2017) observed that politicians have reduced their usage of conventional media such as radio, television, and newspaper to the use of social media platforms during electioneering campaigns because of the participatory, interactive, and affordable features of the platforms. Suffice it to say that social media is fast turning into an influential tool for politicians, spin doctors/campaign planners to execute political campaigns by mobilizing and galvanizing citizens to support a political candidate.

The application of social media in the Nigerian political terrain became obvious during the 2011 general election. Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) corroborate that in recent years, political usage of social media has increased across most of Africa, including Nigeria. The authors further accentuate that Nigeria's 2011 general elections were a major turning point in the country's usage of social media for political communication. The above development was stimulated by the success story recorded by President Barack Obama, who used Facebook for his political campaign and eventually emerged as the first black president of the United States of America (Omenugha, Ukwueze, & Malizu, 2011).



After the 2011 general election, the usage of social media in the Nigerian political ambiance became more consistent and customary. For instance, social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs were heavily used during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria (Obono, 2016). Similarly, Obono and Diyo (2021) confirmed that social media platforms were also used intensely during the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. The above implies that social media has become a veritable and fashionable campaign instrument for Nigerian politicians in recent years (Oparaugo 2021). In his words, (Oparaugo 2021, p11) observed that:

Nigerian politicians use social media to a great extent, especially during elections and electoral campaigns. These politicians would write long epistles on their Facebook pages addressing an issue or stating their stand on a burning issue. The incumbents often use this medium to brief the general public on what their administration is doing to ensure the progress of the state or country. On the other hand, the opposition uses it to cast aspersions on the wrong decisions and wrong steps taken by the ruling party. Be it as it may, Facebook posts by politicians would always draw support and criticism in the comment section from the electorates who are social media users.

From the foregoing, it is apposite to infer that social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have facilitated direct political interactions between political aspirants and voters in Nigeria. No wonder almost all Nigerian politicians have a social media presence due to its relevance in the country's political sphere. For instance, all the presidential candidates contesting the 2023 election in Nigeria have social media accounts, even though these accounts are mostly managed by their campaign spin doctors.

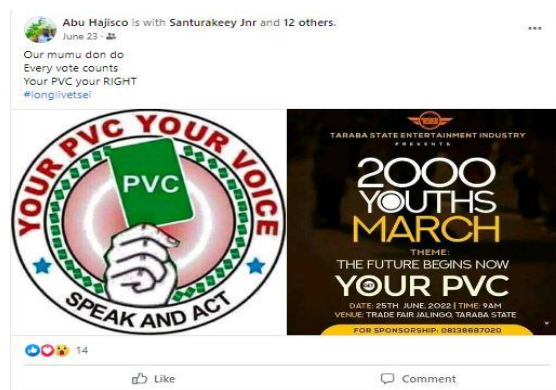
Therefore, it won't be erroneous to infer that the invention of social media has strengthened the growth of Nigerian politics despite the gamut of challenges that sometimes affect its usage. The veracity of the above claim is hinged on the fact that social media has emerged as a significant and effective platform for voter education, political action, and the rapid broadcast of information. Social media sites like Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube encourage public participation in politics (Paul, 2019).

Pwashikai and Shem (2019) corroborate that the invention of social media has helped enormously in not only developing the nature of Nigerian politics but has also played an indispensable function in consolidating the country's democratic process. Nwoke, Oyiga, and Ihuoma (2021) corroborate that in recent years, accountability was somewhat achieved during the elections in Nigeria as a result of social media witnessing. In other words, social media users have the option of live-streaming the voting process in polling units from various locations. The above situation will no doubt discourage malicious electoral practices such as illegal voting by minors, violence, intimidation, money inducement, and other unethical behaviors.

Despite the multicultural nature of Nigerian society, social media serves as a public sphere that unites citizens to deliberate and decide on political issues affecting them. For instance, in recent times, there have been a lot of discussions and awareness campaigns on social media platforms that encourage Nigerians to register and obtain Permanent Voters' Cards (PVC) for the 2023 general elections.

**Figure 1.**

**A Screenshot of A Facebook Post by Abu Hajisco Encouraging Nigerians to Get Their PVC and Vote in The 2023 General Election.**



*Source: A Screenshot of A Facebook Post by Abu Hajisco Encouraging*

The above screenshot is one of the numerous posts on Facebook and other social media platforms that aim at creating awareness among Nigerians to get their voters and vote in the forthcoming 2023 general election. From the foregoing, it is apposite to assert that social media has the potency to encourage political participation even in a multicultural ambiance.

Social Media Use for Decision Making During Politics in a Multicultural Society. Evidence from extant empirical studies revealed social media platforms command a huge influence on human behavior. According to Oparaugo (2021, p.16), “Social media has a great impact on the voting pattern of the electorates, especially youths who constitute the largest proportion of social media users in Nigeria”. Omotayo and Folorunso (2020) in their study found that young people heavily utilized social media for political activity. The most popular app was Facebook, which was then followed by Whatsapp, Instagram, Twitter, and Yahoo Messenger. The majority of young people use social media to engage in political advocacy, political campaigns, correspondence with politicians, political debates, monitoring and reporting electoral fraud, public consultations, joining lobbying interest groups, blogging about political issues, and writing letters to public officials, among other activities.

In a study conducted by Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016), results show that social media political campaigns significantly influenced the electorate's decision-making and involvement in the Nigerian elections. The study reiterates the importance of social media in a country's political life, particularly during elections. Similarly, in a different study conducted by Okoro and Santas (2017), it was found that social media was used for political communication during the 2011 presidential election in Nigeria. The study's findings also indicated that the usage of social media during the 2011 presidential election had a significant impact on the majority of respondents' decision on which candidate to support.

Apuke and Tunca (2018) also studied the implications of social media use throughout the campaigning and voting procedures for the general elections in Nigeria in 2011 and 2015. The findings of their research revealed that social media was used because of its participatory character and was used to shape the opinions of many young people, raising their level of political knowledge. These studies demonstrate that the use of social media during the elections of 2011 and 2015 had an impact on voting patterns.

It could be deduced from the reviewed studies that the use of social media within the Nigerian political sphere has, over the years, influenced citizens to

actively get involved in political activities. Furthermore, it is apposite to note the contents of these platforms have the potency to influence electorates' decisions, as observed by Onyebuchi, Obasi, and Amadi (2019).

Challenges of social media use in politics in a multicultural society. The liberal nature of social media makes the platform contain all sorts of malicious content that is hazardous to a multicultural and democratic society like Nigeria. In other words, the fact that social media platforms have less or no censorship within the Nigerian makes its content unreliable in most cases. Momoh (2019) corroborates that because social media in Nigeria is uncontrolled, fake news becomes prevalent and inevitable, especially during electioneering campaigns. Shadrach and Apuke (2020) found in their study that Nigerians use social media extensively, primarily Facebook and Twitter, for political discussion. However, the majority of this discourse lacks objectivity and is filled with attacks, counterattacks, and hate speech, displaying religious, ethnic, and political biases. This suggests that rather than strengthening Nigeria's political system, social media in Nigeria has generally increased division.

After thorough investigation and based on the evidence obtained from the majority of the extant studies explored by the researchers of this paper, the following were found as some of the common and reoccurring challenges faced with the use of social media in politics in a multicultural society like Nigeria:

**Fake news:** fake news is one of the common issues bedeviling the use of social media in politics within the Nigerian political sphere. It is pathetic that politicians and their spin doctors, more often than not, create, nurture, and foster the spread of fake news to enable them to achieve their political goals. Cable News (2016) observed that Nigeria is in a hazardous position as a result of the phenomenal growth of false news on social media in that nation.

Wilson and Umar (2019) examined the effect of fake news on Nigerian democracy and found that despite respondents' knowledge of false news, there is little concern for the sensitivity of checking information before sharing. The study also discovered that false news affects politics and crises more than any other type of situation.

Similarly, Pwashikai and Shem (2019) observed that in Nigeria, the 2011 general was recorded as one of the bloodiest. According to Adeyanju and Haruna (2011), the usage of social media either started or fueled the terrible experience.

Adeyanju and Haruna (2011) further revealed that at that time, Facebook and other social media sites were overrun with rumors and gossip, which heightened political unrest and anxiety.

In light of the above, it is obvious that the existence and spread of fake news on social media platforms is a serious challenge to the use of these platforms for political purposes despite their auspicious potencies.

**Hate Speech:** Just like fake news, hate speech is also a serious problem on social media, especially during electioneering campaigns. According to Nazif, Shamsu, and Shem (2020), the majority of hate speech on the internet is either politically or religiously motivated. For instance, research by Okafor and Olanrewaju (2017) found that campaign content on social media before the 2015 general elections in Nigeria was full of hate speeches, provocation, intimidation, and blackmail, creating a climate of fear and anxiety among the political class.

Alkali, Faga, and Mbursa (2016) in their study looked at the issue of hate speech and profanity on social media platforms in Nigeria and its moral and legal repercussions on the Nigerian community. They discovered that hate speech and offensive language are more common on social media sites in Nigeria.

Olufunke (2019) observed that because hate speech is intolerant and disrespectful of human dignity, it is pervasive in Nigerian culture and can obstruct the nation's progress and development. Therefore, it is apt to note that the "intolerant and disrespectful" nature of hate speech has the potential to cause political unrest and uproar, which is inimical to democracy and national development.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Based on the literature reviewed, it is apposite to infer that social media platforms are used fervently by politicians and their spin doctors during electioneering campaigns and other related purposes. Furthermore, it is also apposite to note that social media has helped enormously in fostering political discourse in Nigeria through debates on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, etc. (Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020). Based on the data obtained from reviewed studies, it is obvious that despite the multicultural nature of Nigerian

society, social media serves as a public sphere that unites citizens to deliberate and decide on political issues affecting them. For instance, in recent times, there have been a lot of discussions and awareness campaigns on social media platforms that encourage Nigerians to register and obtain Permanent Voters' Cards (PVC) for the 2023 general elections.

From the extant research data that have been analyzed, it can be concluded that social media use in Nigerian politics has influenced Nigerian's political decisions in many ways, ranging from their choices of candidates to their active participation in politics. Suffice it to say that social media platforms have helped enormously in consolidating Nigerian politics.

Despite the auspicious advantages of social media use in politics in Nigeria, it is worth noting that there are several challenges bedeviling the use of these platforms for political purposes. Some of the common and dangerous challenges are the spread of fake news and hate speeches on social media. From the extant studies we analyzed, we found that the issue of fake news and hate speech is often associated with political and religious issues. For instance, before the 2015 general elections in Nigeria, campaign materials on social media were discovered to be full of hate speech, provocation, intimidation, and blackmail, which contributed to an atmosphere of dread and anxiety among the political elite (Okafor & Olanrewaju, 2017). Momoh (2019) also corroborates that because social media in Nigeria is uncontrolled, fake news becomes prevalent and inevitable, especially during electioneering campaigns.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper concludes that despite the challenges bedeviling social media use in politics within the Nigerian public sphere, the platforms have their auspicious functions and have, over the years, consolidated the country's politics and democracy through diverse ways. Therefore, this study recommends that to fully harness the potential of social media use in politics; there is a need for the government and relevant stakeholders to strategically and consistently educate Nigerians on the effects of fake news and hate speech. Even though there are mechanisms in place for the detection of fake news, it is also appropriate for the government and social media developers to intensify efforts on new techniques for the detection of fake news and restriction of fake news. Furthermore, the

government should employ strict measures without any form of bias against social media users who derive pleasure from creating, nurturing, and sharing fake news and hate speeches on social media platforms. Those who are found guilty of either creating or spreading the spread of fake news and hate speeches should be punished.

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### **About the Author**

Sarah Gambo lectures with the Department of Broadcasting at the University of Abuja, Nigeria. Her research interests include new media, broadcasting, interpersonal communication, and development communication.

Woyopwa Shem lectures with the Department of Mass Communication at Taraba State University, Jalingo, Nigeria. His scholarly pursuits encompass the domains of health communication, new media, political communication, and development communication.

Billy Graham Abel lectures with the Department of Mass Communication at Adamawa State Polytechnic, Yola, Nigeria.

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