

PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF GOVERNMENT POLICY ON HATE SPEECH IN THE NIGERIAN MEDIA: A SURVEY OF AUDIENCE IN IMO STATE

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Abstract

Man has been known since primordial epoch to instinctively display a desire to express himself in matters that concern his general welfare and the development of the society in which he finds himself. Over the years, hate speech has fuelled violent conflicts, civil wars and even genocides as seen in the anti-Semitic propaganda prevalent in the old Nazi, Germany. Even the Rwandan genocide was also a product of hate speech. Perception theory was used, while the methodology was survey research design. The population of the study is the residents of Imo State which consists of 5,408,800. The sample size is 200, derived through the use of Australian Sample Size Calculator. Analyses of data revealed that 50% of the respondents were highly aware of government policy on hate speech in the media. The researcher arrived the conclusion that the right of every citizen to free speech is one of the peoples' fundamental human rights and should not be abused, adding that most Nigerians are not comfortable with this hate speech bill, would not want its' passage into law. The researcher recommends that government and the media should discuss more on the policy on hate speech in a way that will show the true nature of the policy in order to disabuse the minds of the people that the policy is targeted at certain ethnic groups.

Keywords: Audience, Public Perception, Government Policy, Hate Speech and Media

Introduction

Man has been known since primordial epoch to instinctively display a desire to express himself in matters that concern his general welfare and the development of the society in which he finds himself. Layefa and Johnson (2016) state that as societies develop, the inner most desire of man has more often been met with repressive tendencies in form of draconian laws, banishment, physical torture, etc. meted out by the ruling government. Man, nevertheless has remained dauntless in the quest for free expression of thoughts.

According to Awake (2003:19) "The ability to speak is one unique trait that separates us from the animals. Sadly, some people misuse this privilege. Insults, cursing, profanity, blasphemy, vulgarities, and obscene language can hurt sometimes more than physical injuries. More and more people swear and curse routinely. Schools are reporting an increase in the use of foul language by children. Some people claim though, that hurtful speech can be beneficial when used for emotional release". From the foregoing, it is obvious that speech plays a significant role in human relationships. When used properly, words whether spoken or written can be up building. Like apples of gold in silver carvings is a word spoken at the right time. In the same vein, thoughtless speech is like the stabs of a sword.

Over the years, hate speech has fuelled violent conflicts, civil wars and even genocides as seen in the anti-cemitic propaganda prevalent in the Old Nazi, Germany. Even the Rwandan genocide was also a product of hate speech (Isola, 2018). The problem with hate speech is that those peddling the speech of hate may not directly have it in mind to cause conflict or war but the problem is that if not well checked, such hate speech can lead to war. It is the duty of the government in power, in the interest of peace, to ensure that this hate speech as seen in the media is curbed. The media do publish and broadcast hate speech that are likely to lead to more mass killings (Haddey, Hazel and Herta, 1993).

Adedokun (2019) noted that in Nigeria of today that one hears so many news on radio and television, and newspapers which have created lots of problems not only for the individuals indicted and their families but it has also created disunity and conflicts of different types in Nigerian economics. There are cases where unfounded and unverified stories have led to crisis and killings of various types in the country. Mamah, Akinferon, Agbakwuru and Afer (2017) observe that it is the bid to curb the issues of hate associated with hate speech that the Federal Government of Nigeria thought it wise and decided to draw the line on hate speech by declaring it a form of terrorism. Thereby making it part of the president Buhari led administration government policy. This means that the government will make hate speech part of its focus and possibly put structures in place that will help fight cases of hate speech.

The European Court of Human Rights, 2017 aver that hate speech in all its forms mean hatred. It may be

hatred expressed towards a nation, ethnic group, marginal groups or personalities especially among politicians. It is a fact that freedom of expression is one of the important basis and foundation of any society, especially in a democratic society. People have hidden behind this freedom of expression provided by democracy to spread hate comments which are capable of affecting the unity and peace of a nation.

Enahoro (2017) sees hate speech as polluted statements, especially by Nigerians attacking each other on the basis of ethnicity or religion. Nadim and Fledmoe (2016) describe hate speech as any persecuting, degrading or discriminating speech on ground of the recipient's minority group identity and that such speech that will regarded as hate speech must be conveyed publicly or in the presence of others and be directed at a certain group or on individuals assumed group identity.

As a policy, the Federal Government has made it clear that hate speech will form part of its policy as a way of crushing seditious comments aimed at discrediting the nation and fuelling crisis. To do this, the government has sent a bill to the National Assembly on the prohibition of hate speech in the country. The essence of the bill is to help the government pursue its policy of crushing hate speech with the backing of the law, that is, if the bill is passed into law.

However, Amnesty (2019) has stated that the wordings of the bill are too punitive due to the insertion of death penalty for those found guilty. Mondaq (2020) noted that the current hate speech bill has remained one of the controversial bills that has passed any reading on the floor of the National Assembly. Some actors have stated that Nigeria has enough laws that can address the issues of hate speech such as sedition and criminal defamation (Falana, 2017).

Despite all these efforts of the government to curb hate speech, the media still have several stories conveying hate on their platforms. Alakali, Fage and Mburse (2016) fathom that there is a correlation between the media and hate speech and that the social media is mostly the prevalent platform used to propagate hate speech in Nigeria. They went further to note that the social media offer an ideal platform to spread hate speech so easily because of its interactive nature.

It is against this backdrop that Eknhornu (2017) observe that the media that is expected to edit and curb hate speeches are not living up to expectation because they want to get advert patronage and will not want to be blocked or prevented from entering government house. This is the fate of main stream media houses. Of course, it is obvious that the social media aspect cannot be easily regulated, hence, most hate speech on social media have gone viral.

It is against this backdrop therefore that this study sought to examine Imo State resident's perception of government policy against hate speech as reported in the media.

Statement of the problem

Most countries of the world have experienced first-hand consequence of hate speech, countries like Nazi Germany and Miama. Nigeria has also had its fair share of hate speech in the various riots and after the civil war of which ended in 1970. Adedokun (2019) pointed out that hate speech in the media has created lots of problems in Nigeria for the individuals indicted and their family and has also created conflict in various Nigerian communities.

The Federal Government of Nigeria has decided to fight hate speech by making it part of its policy. It is the duty of the Nigerian media to help government make this policy popular by enlightening the people more on government desire to stamp out hate speech in the media. However, this seems not to be so. Could it be that the people are not conversant with this policy of the government on hate speech or that they have a different perception towards the policy?

It is against this backdrop therefore, that this study sought to examine Imo State resident's perception of government policy against hate speech as reported in the media.

Research questions

The study raised the following research questions:

1. What is the awareness level of residents of Imo State on government policy on hate speech in the media?
2. What is the knowledge level of residents in Imo State on government policy against hate speech in the media?
3. What is the perception of residents of Imo State on government policy against hate speech in the media?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.

Overview of hate speech

The nature and characteristics of hate speech is still very much uncertain in the literature. Hate speech is considered as any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display, which could incite people to violence or prejudicial actions (Alakali, Faga & Mbursa, 2017). UN on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2013) notes that hate speech includes:

- a. All dissemination of ideas based on racial or ethnic superiority or hatred, by whatever means;
- b. Incitement to hatred, contempt or discrimination against members of a group on grounds of their race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin;
- c. Threats or incitement to violence against persons or groups on the grounds in (b) above
- d. Expression of insults, ridicule or slander of persons or groups or justification of hatred, contempt or discrimination on the grounds in (b) above, when it clearly amounts to incitement to hatred or discrimination; and
- e. Participation in organizations and activities, which promote and incite racial discrimination.

Hate speech refers to all communications (whether verbal, written, symbolic) that insults a racial, ethnic and political group, whether by suggesting that they are inferior in some respect or by indicating that they are despised or not welcome for any other reasons. On the other hand, Kayambazinhu and Moyo (2002) refer to hate speech as - war waged on others by means of words. This understanding of hate speech is particularly true when it comes to hate speech on social media networks. Online hate speech is mainly characterized by the use of words and symbols.

As regards motivation of hate speech, many scholars have pointed out several factors, such as lack of tolerance, political clashes, discrimination, enmity and the openness of social media as motivating hate speech online. For instance, even before the emergence of social media, Spiegel (1999) predicted that the internet will be another communication tool for racists and hate-mongers to spread their messages, and Nemes (2002) considered the internet a very important channel for those who want to spread messages of hatred. Witschge (2008), however, presented a more balanced understanding of the Web's potentials within political communication. On the one hand, he endorses Brant's (2008) views of a horizontal, open and user-friendly nature of the internet, which affords people with opportunities for greater participation in the public sphere, on the other hand however, he subscribes to Dalhberg's (2001) counter arguments that the Web might facilitate abusive postings and even contribute in silencing some voices. Finally, Witschge argues that whether the Web enables deliberation or not, it depends on how people utilize the opportunities provided online.

Stating the effects of hate speech, Leets (2002) says it violates the individual's dignity, resulting in humiliation, distress and psychological or emotional pain. Similarly, Nemes (2002) avers that hate speech can provoke pain, distress, fear, embarrassment and isolation to individuals. While hate speech towards groups of people can bring inequality problems and isolation, it creates the feeling of fear and discourages them from participating in the community and expressing their opinions. Adding to the argument, Nielsen (2002) avers that the degradation and humiliation brought by hate speech can silence the victims and therefore reinforce existing hierarchies in society; while Parekh, (2006) says it can also lead victims to become aggressive and dangerous.

According to Gagliardone, Danit, Thiago and Gabriela (2015, online hate speech is not essentially different from similar expressions found offline; however, there are some specific characteristics as well as challenges unique to online content and its regulation. They summarized these characteristics as permanence, itinerant, anonymity or pseudonym and transnationality. On permanence, hate speech can remain online for long periods of time and in different formats across different platforms, and can be repeatedly linked. In this sense, the architecture of any particular platform influences how long topics "stay alive". For instance, Twitter is built around the idea of trending topics, which may facilitate quick and wide dissemination of hateful messages, however, if topics are ignored, discussion rapidly fades. Face book on the other hand, provides the opportunity for longer lasting discussion threads.

Notwithstanding, online hate speech content may particularly be itinerant, which means that even when it is removed from one platform it may find expression elsewhere, possibly on the same platform under a different name or on different online spaces. If a website is shut down, it can quickly reopen using a webhosting service with less stringent regulations or via reallocation to a country with laws imposing higher

threshold for hate speech. The itinerant nature of hate speech also means that poorly formulated thoughts that would not have found public expression and support in the past may now arrive on spaces where they can be visible to large audiences (Alakali, Faga and Mbursa, 2017).

Public's perception on the hate speech

The masses perceive the inclusion of a capital punishment like the 'death by hanging' penalty for the offence of hate speech as being extreme, draconian and autocratic. Although the Senate sponsors of the Bill, after seeing people's agitation and outcry over the bill promised to review the harsh punitive sanctions, their decision is not final as it is still subject to deliberations by the House of Representatives (Orji, 2020).

The hate speech bill generalized every insulting and abusive word to be broad and contain provisions which appear to be biased and intentionally enacted for a particular ethnic group just to punish them for their sentimental statements which the government think to be hate speeches. So far it is a law here in Nigeria, it is no news that there are those who are above the law in this country, most of these people are those who made the law and are wedging that the law be passed.

There is a thin line between hate speech and offensive speech since not all forms of offensive speech can be categorized as a hate speech. The description of hate speech in relation to the Bill should have been restricted to some extreme circumstances, for instance, a statement made with the intention of inciting tribal wars and causing a division of the country, statements that clearly indicates imminent danger or injury on certain people etc. If this Bill is enacted into law in its raw form, it will imply that even comedians who crack sarcastic ethnic related jokes can be construed as guilty of the offence of hate speech by ethnic affiliations offended by the direction of the jest. Even if there is need for the bill, government should devise better modalities for enforcing the provisions of the Bill without causing civil unrest among the various factions of Nigeria's ethnic groups (Independent 2020).

For most people, the bill was made for unpopular offenders who are anti-government and hates the current government. These unpopular perceived offenders are from a particular tribe, which the Northerners are not among. A law made for others and excluding the ruling government's people is biased and shouldn't stand to be debated in any country's law making body (Mondaq, 2020).

Furthermore, there are some significant omissions in the Bill, which should have been included during the drafting of the Bill. For instance, there was no express provision for the liability or exemption from liability of internet platforms, content intermediaries, or social media platforms where such contravening offences are committed. Also, the Bill does not contain a comprehensive interpretation section clearly defining some words and phrases used in the Bill. Similarly, there was no punishment prescribed for corporate entities, asides from the application of the penalties to their alter ego. A compulsory winding up of the company could have been included as appropriate penalty for corporate entities.

Empirical review

Esimokha, Bobmanuel and Asaolu (2019) conducted a study on Perception of Nigerians on Hate Speech Bill (A Study of Akungba-Okoko Residents, Ondo State). Findings from this study revealed that majority of the respondents (87.2%) were aware of the Hate speech Bill and majority of them were aware of the bill not just of recent. Finding out about the relevance of the bill in the present democratic dispensation, most of the respondents said the bill is irrelevant. In fact, 42.6% of the respondents strongly agreed that it is irrelevant.

Olufunke (2020) examined the effect of hate speech on citizens in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. The population consisted of residents of Ibadan, Oyo State estimated at over 6,000,000. The findings amongst others showed that hate speech affects its victims to the extent that some can become distressed and withdrawn from public debate. The study also showed that there were no legal laws on hate speech.

Alakali (2017) examined the phenomenon of hate speech and foul language on social media platforms, although, the respondents understand that hate speech and foul language attract legal consequences, they do not know what obligations are created by law against perpetrators of hate speech and foul language in Nigeria. The paper therefore, adopted the qualitative, doctrinal and analytical methodology to discuss the legal consequences and obligations created against perpetrators of hate speech and foul language in Nigeria.

Esimokha (2019) conducted a study on Perception of Nigerians on Hate Speech Bill (A Study of Akungba-Okoko Residents, Ondo State) which revealed that majority of the respondents (87.2%) were aware of the Hate speech Bill and majority of them were aware of the bill not just of recent. The relevance of the bill in the present democratic dispensation, most of the respondents said the bill is irrelevant. In fact, 42.6% of the respondents strongly agreed that it is irrelevant.

Ideals (2017) examined the phenomenon of hate speech and foul language on social media platforms in Nigeria, and assessed their moral and legal consequences in the society and to journalism practice. It used both quantitative and qualitative methodology to investigate the phenomenon. Findings from the research indicate that promoting hate speech and foul language on social media have moral and legal consequences in the society and to journalism practice. It also shows that although, the respondents understand that hate speech and foul language attract legal consequences, they do not know what obligations are created by law against perpetrators of hate speech and foul language in Nigeria.

Aghogho (2020) examined public perception of the contributions of social media to political participation processes in Delta State, Nigeria. It adopted the survey method using a sample of 500 respondents selected through a multistage sampling technique. Findings revealed that although the social media were perceived to have positively influenced Nigeria's democracy by enhancing the flow of political information and awakening public political consciousness, the news and information being disseminated on social media platforms were noted to have increased the state of hate speech and stoked political unease.

Theoretical framework

This study was built on perception theory. Perception theory was developed by social psychologist Daryl Bem in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The basic premise of the perception theory is that perception is the process through which people are aware of objects and events in the external world. It lends itself to be useful in therapy or persuasion related contexts. Clauseus (2014) noted that perception helps us to understand events, issues and the difference between reality and illusion. He noted that task of human perception is to amplify and strengthen sensory input to be able to perceive, orientate and act very quickly, specifically and efficiently.

According to Flamand (2011), perception is the ability to make some kind of sense to reality from the external sensory stimuli which people are exposed. Several factors can influence perception causing it to change in certain ways. Based on this theory, the public perceive laid down rules with a particular mental criticism that might lead them to either accept a policy or reject it.

This theory is relevant to this study because it reveals how people form their perception towards a given issue. In essence, the public can have a perception towards government policy on hate speech in the media based on their exposure to people's comment and report on the policy and their past experiences.

Methodology

This study employed survey research design which allows for investigation into a wide or large area with a view to ascertain what exists at a time of the research (Iherue, 2019). The population of this study is the residents of Imo State which consists of 5,408,800, according to the National Population Commission projected estimate of 2020. The sample size for this study is 200. This was gotten through the use of Australian Sample Size Calculator.

The sampling technique of this study is the multi-state sampling technique. This enabled the researcher to divide the area of study into existing clusters. In the first stage, Imo State was divided into three senatorial districts of Orlu, Owerri, and Okigwe zones. In stage two, two Local Governments were selected from each of these zones, from Orlu zone, Orlu and Orsu Local Governments were selected; from Owerri zone, Owerri municipal and Owerri north were selected; from Okigwe zone, Okigwe and Onuimo Local Governments were selected. In the third stage, two communities were selected from each of the selected Local Governments and this gave it a total of twelve communities. In the fourth stage, the researcher divided the sample size of 200 by 12 which gave 17. This means that in each of the selected communities, 17 persons were studied. The research instrument of this study was questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed using close ended styles alongside Likert scale.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The researcher distributed 200 copies of the instrument and was able to retrieve the entire 200 copies, meaning that the researcher had 100% return on instrument.

Research Question One: What is the awareness level of residents of Imo State on Government policy on hate speech in the media?

Table 2: Respondents response on being aware of the governments hate speech policy in the media

Options	Frequency	Percent
Aware	200	100%
Not aware	-	-
Total	200	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

The above finding shows that all (100%) the respondents are aware of the government hate speech policy in the media.

Table 3: Publics' awareness level on the governments hate speech policy

Options	Frequency	Percent
Very High	65	32.5%
High	35	17.5%
Moderate	60	30%
Low	40	20%
Total	200	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

The above findings showed that majority of the respondents (32.5%) were moderately aware of the governments hate speech policy and the punitive measures following the policy.

Research Question Two: What is the knowledge level of residents in Imo State on Government policy against hate speech in the media?

Table 4: Publics' knowledge level on the governments hate speech policy in the media

Options	Frequency	Percent
Very High knowledge level	80	40%
High knowledge level	40	20%
Moderate knowledge level	50	25%
Low knowledge level	30	15%
Total	200	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

The respondents from the above finding are moderately (40%) knowledgeable on the government hate speech policy in the media.

Research Question Three: What is the perception of residents of Imo State on Government policy against hate speech in the media?

Table 5: Publics' perception on the governments hate speech policy

Perceptions	Options	Frequency	Percent
The policy is autocratic and against Nigerians fundamental human right to speech	Strongly Agree	70	35%
	Agree	30	15%
	Strongly Disagree	65	32.5%
	Disagree	35	17.5%
	Total	200	100%
The policy was initiated by Nigerian politicians to satisfy their hidden political ambition more than the intended good ambition	Strongly Agree	80	40%
	Agree	40	20%
	Strongly Disagree	50	25%
	Disagree	30	15%
	Total	200	100%
The punitive measures that came with the policy are deadly and need amendment	Strongly Agree	65	32.5%
	Agree	60	30%
	Strongly Disagree	40	20%
	Disagree	35	17.5%
	Total	200	100%

Source: Field Survey, 2021

Discussion of findings

The publics' awareness level on the governments hates speech policy in the media

Analyses of data revealed that 50% of the respondents were highly aware of government policy on hate speech in the media. This means that the number of people who are aware of hate speech in the media in Imo state are average. In essence, 50% of the residents in Imo state are aware or have heard of the hate speech policy of the government. The findings of this study is related to that of Esimokha, Bobmanuel, and Asaolu (2019) study which showed that majority of their respondents (32.5%) were aware of the Hate speech bill. The awareness of the bill which is in the House of Assembly was made to support the policy of the government. In essence, it means that the people are also aware of government policy on hate speech. Considering the fact that only 32% were aware as at 2019, the findings of this study show reasonable increment on awareness from 32% to 50% in 2021.

The publics' knowledge level on what the hate speech policy entails

Further analysis in respect to the knowledge of the respondents towards government policy on hate speech reveal that 60% of the respondents are highly knowledgeable about the government policy on hate speech. The finding of this study is in line with that of Alakali (2017) which reveal that the respondents are knowledgeable about hate speech and foul language when used in the media. However, they are not aware if there are existing laws to tackle the issue of hate speech. The idea of not being aware if there is any law backing hate speech, it's on its own another form of knowledge because there is no standing law of hate speech in the country. This is why the government is proposing a bill in the National Assembly for the fight against hate speech in the country.

Publics' perception on the hate speech government policy

Analysis of data reveal that over 60% of the residents of Imo State have negative perception towards government policy on hate speech. The Imo State residents perception on the hate speech policy showed that most of them think that: the hate speech policy is autocratic and against Nigerians fundamental human right to speech; was passed by Nigerian politicians to satisfy their hidden political ambition (ulterior motive) more than the intended good ambition; the punitive measures that came with the policy is deadly and needs amendment; and that the policy was made mainly for Easterners and the Westerners but as for the Northerners and rich politicians they are above this law.

This is in line with Esimokha, Bobmanuel and Asaolu (2019) study describing the bill as a bad bill, that the government tends to benefit more if passed into law, and that the bill would not be beneficial to Nigeria as a nation. The respondents justify this claim as 73.7% of the respondents were of the opinion that the freedom of

expression would be tampered with if such bill is passed into law. Adegboruwa (2019) added that Nigerians should stand up to this government, which rose to power on the back of the social media. Now that the government has power, it wants to remove the ladder, which it used to attain its present position. We will not allow its plan to succeed. The bill will be challenged in court.

Conclusion

The right of every citizen to free speech is one of the people's fundamental human right and should not be abused, the government are supposed to place restrictions on those rights necessary to protect the rights of other citizens or public confidence in the government and its systems. Nigeria as a country claims to operate a democratic system of government, laws which tend to abridge the fundamental rights of citizens require proper consultations with the people or their representatives before such Bills are proposed in the legislative houses. The legislative body, as one of its duties, is permitted to originate Bills, bordering on any lawful issue, to be passed into law but such powers also needs to be checked to curtail incidents of legislators who want to feather their nests, seek their parochial interests rather that effectively representing and furthering the interest of the people who elected them.

It can be concluded that most Nigerians are not comfortable with this hate speech bill, and would not want its' passage into law. They believe it would jeopardize freedom of expression in the country. This simply means that the bill is anti-people.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made:

- The fact that only 50% of the people are highly aware of the government policy of hate speech is not sufficient. It is therefore recommended that the government and the media should do more to create awareness on the hate speech policy so as to have more awareness for the people.
- The finding that only 60% of the respondents are highly knowledgeable about government policy on hate speech in the media is not sufficient. Therefore, it is recommended that more programmes on the hate speech policy should be aired by the media as a way of creating in-depth knowledge of the policy before the people.
- It is recommended that government and the media should discuss more on the policy on hate speech in a way that will show the true nature of the policy in order to disabuse the minds of the people that the policy is targeted at certain ethnic group.

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