

# Media and Information Literacy as a Panacea for National Integration in an Era of Hate Speech in Nigeria

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examined hate speech as a threat to Nigeria's national unity and national integration. It is designed to x-ray people's understanding of what constitute hate and the role of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in promoting national unity and integration in Nigeria. Qualitative research method was adopted in conducting the research. Data was collected using interview and descriptive method was used in the analysis. A total of 72 participants were purposively selected for the interview from the six geo-political zones in Nigeria. The findings show that majority of the respondents were not familiar with the concept of MIL; the study also showed that effective implementation of MIL competencies will not only curb the spread of hate speech in Nigeria but also ensure national unity and national integration. The paper concludes by recommending that there is need for sensitisation among Nigerians on the dangers of hate speech and the remedy provided by MIL in order to produce citizens who will harmoniously work together to build the country.

**Keywords:** Media and Information literacy; Hate speech; National integration; National unity; Misinformation and disinformation; Nigeria

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Information and knowledge have played a significant role in the survival of man in his environment. Today, the mainstream media and the 'new media' have brought information closer to the people without restrictions. They have provided the avenue for people to share information that can shape their opinions, attitudes and decisions. They have also assisted in creating forums through which people can exchange ideas and communicate experiences to other members of the society. In other words, news and information can be accessed from anywhere and at anytime by billions of people globally. Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is seen as a "combination of knowledge, attitudes, skills and practices required to access, analyze, evaluate, use, produce, and communicate information and knowledge in creative, legal and ethical ways that respect human rights" IFLA<sup>1</sup>. It equips an individual with the knowledge and responsibilities required in using the media and information systems, the conditions under which these responsibilities can be performed and ways in which the individual can benefit, contribute and evaluate the content of the information. Therefore, an understanding of the components of MIL will no doubt enhance communication among individuals in a 21<sup>st</sup> century society.

### 1.1 Amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914

The Nigerian state is a creation of the British colonial

rule through the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914. There were several conditions which necessitated the amalgamation such as economic, harmonised development plans for the whole territory and the desire of the colonial authorities to strengthen their hold on Nigeria. Thus the British did not consider to how much Nigerians would benefit or lose from it. As observed by Eric<sup>2</sup> "the significance of Nigeria's amalgamation is centered on the unifying factor that ended colonialism and brought about the ethnic wrangling amongst the diverse interests. The disunity in Nigeria could be seen among varying ethnic nationalities and religious groups". Consequently, the expected benefits of bringing the two protectorates together, which was to unify them turned to create endless hostility between them because they were not prepared for it. The failure of amalgamation is seen as causative to the series of crisis that has taken place in Nigeria including the civil war, militancy, many ethnic nationalities agitating for justice and the menace of Boko Haram and Fulani Herdsmen.

### 1.2 Social Media and the Internet as a Means of Transmitting Hate Speech in Nigeria

An analysis of the comments on most articles over the Internet and other aggregator sites leaves one to wonder what the future holds for the unity and peaceful coexistence of Nigerians. Bukarti<sup>3</sup> noted that "these platforms, which were initially conceived of as vehicles for social cohesion, are fast turning into tools for national disunity". While there is nothing wrong with people exercising their freedom of speech, there is everything wrong with demeaning or insulting others through

hate speeches. Hate speeches are dangerous. They target people, as individuals or groups, because of who they are. According to Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary<sup>4</sup> "hate speech is defined as any public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group based on something such as race, religion, sex or sexual orientation". They begin as an idea by one person or a group. Then gradually through constant reiteration and propagation, they are re-echoed and actions are taken towards achieving them. The action may cause severe emotional and psychological damage to the individual or group. Hence if it is not addressed with utmost urgency that it requires in a country where it exists, it could be said that the country would be seen as perching on a precipice.

This study aims to bring to bear the need for effective implementation of Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as a tool for national integration in Nigeria. Many studies have been conducted on the essence of national integration in Nigeria in the past. Still, none of these studies focused on the role of effective implementation MIL in addressing the issue. This study presents a review of the concept of hate speech in a globally changing context. It analyzes some possible alternatives towards sustainable national integration; it also shows the place of MIL in promoting national unity and integration. To present strategic recommendations in this area, the study attempted to find answers to the following questions.

- People's understanding of hate speech and Media and Information Literacy?
- What are the various ways hate speech can threaten national unity in Nigeria?
- Which media/platform is used mainly to disseminate hate speech in Nigeria?
- How can MIL assist in promoting national unity and integration in Nigeria?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Hate speech as a concept came to limelight in recent times due to the proliferation of the Internet. There has not been any uniform or generally accepted definition of the term. Rather it is a broad concept which captures utterances, or any form of literature that attacks an individual or group. Hamad<sup>5</sup> in a review identified the dimensions of hate speech to range from verbal abuse, damage to buildings and property, 'minor' violence, sexual offences, exploitation, and severe violence. Online platforms such as Twitter Google and Facebook have their rules as to what constitutes hate speech and their users are expected to adhere to such rules. The effects of hate speech can be far-reaching, ranging from an individual to a group and the society at large. It has the potential of disturbing social peace, Müller & Schwarz<sup>6</sup>.

In a study conducted by Baba and Aeyinghe<sup>7</sup> in Nigeria, it shows that decentralisation of power and resources to the federated unions, patriotism good governance and effective leadership are some of the alternatives needed to achieve sustainable unity in Nigeria. Aliyu, Safiyan and Husiaini<sup>8</sup> in another study indicated that higher education has a vital role in shaping the future of society. In the same vein, Njeng'ere<sup>9</sup> opined that there is need for a careful design in the curriculum and its implementation to focus on policies of schools, staffing

and role models the society is creating for the children. Njoku<sup>10</sup> is of the view that concentrated efforts towards developing religious studies in Nigeria would ensure national security, integration of Nigerian society. According to Daniel<sup>11</sup>, practicing true federalism would ensure a firmly united, cohesive and integrated Nigeria. Onyeakazi and Okorafor<sup>12</sup> argues that the application of philosophical insight by Nigerians through seeking and upholding the values of truthfulness with one another can change the narrative of national integration in Nigeria.

Media and Information Literacy (MIL) according to Varda and Kyza<sup>13</sup> focuses on assisting individuals to critically make inquiry about the media and information they consume. Developing competencies towards MIL is especially relevant now more than ever in this age of misinformation and information overload especially in digital format. Hoi, Teo and Zhou<sup>14</sup> conducted a study on media and information literacy among University students in Macau China. Result revealed that gender does not affect the level of media and information literacy; participants who own digital devices tended to have a higher self-perceived score on media literacy; participants at Master's Year 2 level showed significantly higher self-perceived scores on the UNESCO information literacy lifecycle. Jones-Jang, Mortensen and Liu<sup>15</sup> in their study revealed that information literacy- but not other literacies- significantly increase the likelihood of identifying fake news stories. Bashri and Rafeeq<sup>16</sup> in a study on media and information literacy among Millennials (those between 23-39 years of age) and Generation Z (those who are 22 or younger) in the UAE. The study reveals a lack of media literacy skills which is very disturbing in this age where misinformation and disinformation are very rife.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This research is conducted with the use of qualitative research methodology. Data was collected using interview. The Researcher adopted the descriptive method of analysis. A total of 72 participants were purposively selected for the interview. The researcher used the already established six geo-political zones in Nigeria to select 12 elites from each zone. Specifically, the researcher interviewed religious leaders, youth groups/associations, socio-cultural associations, civil society groups and media groups in Nigeria using Google Meet. Table 1 shows the states from where the interviewees were drawn.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 People's Understanding of Hate Speech and Media and Information Literacy

The researcher asked each of the interviewees about their understanding of the concept of Media and Information Literacy (MIL); if they were not familiar with the term, they were given a definition and asked for their opinion. The findings show that majority of the interviewees were not familiar with the concept of MIL. The researcher asked the interviewees about their understanding of the concept of hate speech. Majority of the interviewees already have an understanding of the concept. One of them explained it as an utterance targeted at a group or ethnic nationality, which is aimed at tarnishing the image or

**Table 1. States where the interviewees were drawn**

<b>Geopolitical zones</b>	<b>Religious leaders</b>	<b>National orientation agency</b>	<b>Youth groups/ associations</b>	<b>Socio-cultural associations</b>	<b>Civil society groups</b>	<b>The media</b>	<b>Total</b>
Northwest	Kaduna (2)	Jigawa (2)	Zamfara (2)	Katsina (2)	Kano (2)	Kebbi (2)	12
Southwest	Lagos (2)	Ogun (2)	Lagos (2)	Oyo (2)	Ekiti (2)	Ondo (2)	12
Southeast	Abia (2)	Enugu (2)	Ebonyi (2)	Anambra (2)	Imo (2)	Ebonyi (2)	12
North-Central	FCT (2)	Kogi (2)	Kwara (2)	Kogi (2)	Nasarawa (2)	Benue (2)	12
North-East	Taraba (2)	Bauchi (2)	Adamawa (2)	Yobe (2)	Gombe (2)	Yobe (2)	12
South-South	Rivers (2)	Bayelsa (2)	Cross river (2)	Edo (2)	Delta (2)	Akwa Ibom (2)	12
Total							72

Source: Field work by the researcher.

inciting hatred for the group. This is in line with the definition given by Hamad<sup>5</sup>. This implies that having an understanding of the concept of MIL will go a long way in curtailing misinformation, improve human rights and relationships in the society.

#### **4.2 Ways Hate Speech can Threaten National Unity in Nigeria**

The findings show that most of the hate speeches in Nigeria are targeted towards religious groups and different ethnic nationalities. Following the discussions for example, it was pointed out that the 1994 genocide in Rwanda was significantly motivated by hate speech and incitement to violence on a radio station. In Nigeria today, there are careless incitement to violence and high level of insensitivity to the multi-religious, multi-ethnic nature of the Nigerian state, which points towards a repeat of the Rwandan situation. Based on the preceding, the findings reveal that habitual propagation of hate speech in Nigeria tends to initiate violence, breeds disunity or at the extreme could lead to war. This agrees with the findings of (Müller & Schwarz,<sup>6</sup> who revealed that hate speech has the potential of disturbing social peace.

#### **4.3 Media/Platform used Mainly to Disseminate Hate Speech in Nigeria**

The findings reveal that bottled-up emotions of people are channeled in the places of public discourse, especially social media. The interviewees buttressed this point by adding that social media platforms have over the years posed as an instrument for stimulating people to notable action. For example, in the just concluded #Endsars and #Endpolicebrutality protests in Nigeria, social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook Instagram and WhatsApp groups played significant roles in mobilizing people to act in this regard. Bukarti<sup>3</sup> noted that “these platforms, which were initially conceived of as vehicles for social cohesion, are fast turning into tools for national disunity”. The study found that the quantum of hate speech spewed on radio stations across Nigeria is quite alarming, it shows that local dialects are used by some radio stations in transmitting hate speech, weeping up sentiments, and inciting violence.

#### **4.4 Ways Mil can Assist in Promoting National Unity and Integration in Nigeria**

The researcher solicited for information from the interviewee on some of the competencies and skills that are essential for MIL literate individuals. Such competencies and skills include the right to freedom of expression and media freedom; the need for credible and verified information in decision making; ability to search and locate information and media content; ability to access, analyze, and compare needed information and media content effectively, efficiently and ethically; ability to produce and communicate new information and media content for a specific purpose in an innovative, ethical and creative manner using appropriate channels and tools.

#### **4.5 The Right to Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom**

The study revealed that freedom of speech is essential for the survival of any democratic society and the development of humankind. Hence Nigerians are aware of their right as enshrined in the constitution to express themselves freely without interference from the state and they exercise it extensively. The study, however, shows that there are pieces of evidence of deliberate efforts by the government and its mercenaries to clamp down on and criminalize free speech. The findings also revealed that national unity and integration could only be achieved when the citizens are allowed to express themselves without fear of intimidation by the government.

#### **4.6 The Need for Credible and Verified Information in Decision Making**

The study found that disseminating credible and verified information is the duty of every citizen in order to oppose the forces and ideas that weaken national unity and integration. Sequel to the discussions, it was found that when citizens begin to seek for credible and verified information, it goes a long way in curbing the menace of misinformation and disinformation, reduces the publication of fake news and hate speech and produces individuals who harmoniously work together to build a system.

#### 4.7 Possessing the Ability to Search and Locate Information and Media Content

The findings of the study reveal that there is need for individuals to develop skills to effectively harness the enormous amount of information available both online and in print. On its role in promoting national unity and integration; the study found that since hate speeches thrive mostly in online platforms and over the internet, possessing the ability to search for information and media content will enable an individual to distinguish between sources designed to harm others, and it will also assist them in evading such publications. Hence the study shows that lack of patronage to hate speech publications will assist in curbing its spread in the society.

#### 4.8 Possessing the Ability to Access, Analyze, and Compare Needed Information and Media Content Effectively, Efficiently and Ethically

Following the discussions, it was found that it is a task that requires critical thinking to determine if the sources found are credible and meets the required standard. Therefore critical evaluation and comparing between sources is a prerequisite if an individual will be able to survive in this ever-growing pool of information source. The findings reveal that in analyzing and evaluating information, the intent of every published information could be deciphered.

#### 4.9 Possessing the Ability to Produce and Communicate new Information and Media Content in an Ethical and Creative Manner

The findings of the study reveal that becoming an effective communicator would require sending out messages that are clear, concise and accurate which eliminates hitches in the communication process. Following the discussions, the study found that with the possession of an Android phone, anybody can produce information and media content. Hence, new information and media content are produced daily through social media handles such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and others. On its role in promoting national unity and integration, the study found that producing new information and media content ethically serves as a restraint to publications that are harmful, demeaning or insulting and unethical, thereby promoting national integration and national unity.

### 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The amalgamation of northern and southern protectorates without the consent of the Nigeria populace has given rise to animosity among its citizens. They use social media and other places of public discourse as an avenue of transmitting hate speech which is targeted mostly at religious and ethnic nationalities. Despite this animosity, efforts towards bringing together people from different ethnic nationalities to a common endeavour are essential in Nigeria. Hence, Media and Information Literacy. It is therefore pertinent to state here that effective implementation of the competencies of MIL will not only curb the spread of hate speech in Nigeria but also ensure national unity and integration. Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

- Government should allow its citizens to express themselves freely without fear of intimidation.
- Librarians as custodians of knowledge should embark on creating awareness among information seekers on the competencies of MIL in order to inculcate into the citizens the habit of critical thinking, ethical and creative manner of producing new information and media content.
- Media and Information Literacy focuses on instilling critical thinking skills. Hence there is need to introduce MIL in the educational curriculum of students especially from early childhood. This will assist them in developing required skills to access and evaluate information early in life.
- Orientation Agencies in Nigeria should conduct vigorous sensitisation among Nigerians on the dangers of hate speech and the remedy provided by MIL in order to produce citizens who will harmoniously work together to build the country.
- Government should as a matter of urgency strictly enforce sanctions on hate speech promoters and publicly prosecute them as this will discourage hate speech and ensure national unity and national integration in Nigeria.

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