

Invectives as a Language of Dissidence in the Nigeria Social Media Space

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Abstract

The Nigerian government has been accused of insincerity of purpose and lack of sensitivity in the handling of the affairs of the country. The unpopular policies of the Nigerian government resulting into economic meltdown, insecurity and so many social vices in the society etc are giving Nigerians concern to the level of frustration. This frustration has pushed many Nigerians to the social media space, which provides alternative platform for them to offer parallel rhetoric on governance and developmental issues. The virtual, and in some cases, anonymous nature of the social media enable the users to be bold and critical, unlike what they would have not have been able to in physical conversation. This work is propelled by the use of invective dissident language troupe, which has not been sufficiently studied in the context of the Nigerian social medial space. The paper, therefore, investigates Ten (10) randomly selected dissenting opinions of Nigerians used in the Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, which contain invectives using Brown and Levinson (1978) face theory as the framework. Among other findings, this study presents that the high invective nature of dissenting opinions and the wilful intention to promote falsehood for selfish gains on social media are the major reasons for the proposed censoring bills in the country.

Keywords: good governance, invectives, Nigerian politics, the language of dissidence, social media

1. Introduction

Many Nigerians deploy the use of insulting and abusive expressions on the social media to criticise the unpopular policies of government. This action is precipitated on the failures and disappointments experienced from actions and inactions of government. The social media becomes an avenue for Nigerians to express their displeasure over government policies because there is no effective dialogue process for government/citizen in Nigerian.

The critics of government actions in Nigeria are mostly the youths who have a more liberal mind set and more information because of western education and exposure to modern technology. Over the years, younger Nigerians have watched how their generation in Europe and America put government officials on the hot seat regarding their policies and programme through criticisms, innuendos and protests (both violent and non-violent), and how these actions have been able to transform their policy makers and nations. This is one of the greatest impetus for the Nigerian youth the drive for change. As noticed by Frank and Ukpere, 2012, the younger Nigerians are mainly copying what works in Europe and America as the basis for the drive for a change. One cannot blame them in the real sense as they have seen and witness social re-engineering and changes that can come from the ordinary citizen engaging the government on policies, programmes and actions. In reaction to the above, the Nigerian government explored the possibility of enacting appropriate law that could regulate the choice of language use on the social media as a face-saving approach to the vituperations from the social media, which is constituting face threat to government. In the opinion of Brown and Levinson (1978), face threats depend greatly on three basic elements that exist on the relationships between communicators. According to them, the power relationship among communicators is the first of such elements. If a speaker has more perceived power over the other, he or she can easily threaten the face of another without fear of retribution or similar face threat. A good example is that of the government/citizen relationship in Nigerian where the instrument of power and resources needed for a face threat resides on the government. The second element that can impact how face threatening message is interpreted is the relational distance between a speaker and hearer.

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If two individuals are “close” they may be able to communicate in a more direct and civilised manner devoid of invectives and insults; but face threatening devices can easily be deployed when they are far apart. Unlike the first element expressed above, the power at the disposal of government is irrelevant in this case because of the relational distance between the government and the speaker(s). The third element is that of the previous relationship and background knowledge which the interlocutors share. On the basis of this, many Nigerians are greatly disappointed in the political class and how the nation has been governed since independence. Hence, there is a great distrust between the people and the ruling political class.

Even though government is making move to protect threats from the media, many Nigerian social media users have refused to back down on their criticisms and invectives, relying on the space that exists between the government and the individuals on the basis of the social media to continue their virile engagements. This makes the three basic elements for face threatening acts identified by Brown and Levinson (1978) very apt for a study like this. If the government of Nigeria feels abused and threatened by the comments of social media users, they can easily fall back on the first element of a higher power to react to the insults through the enactment of relevant laws and the implementation of the old applicable laws in the situation. This study is not interested in discovering who may win in this competition; rather, it examines the activities and actions of the social media users in demanding an improved situation for the Nigerian citizens through the analysis their posts on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The rationale for this study is to unravel the reason behind the government’s frantic interest in making laws that could reduce face threats and abuse in the social media.

2. Language of Dissidence and Invectives

Language as a sociocultural entity remains a vital tool used by humans to conduct their affairs. As a mean of communication, there is no limit to what humans can communicate using language. As Bates (2001) puts it, language is a tool; and as a tool, we use language to do many things in the real world. As a tool, the shape of language deployed is apt to the aim of communication. There is a great connection between the form of language use and the function (cf. Idegbekwe, 2020). If language indeed is a specialized designed individual tool, which could have shared structures with other person’s language tools, then, an examination of how language is deployed in activities (such as those on the social media) should be able to lean on both the similarities and the subtle differences between individual use and social use of those tools. Van Dijk (2003) argues that actions, both individual and collective, are controlled by mind, and therefore control over the mind – understood as the mental aspect of the individual subject - leads to control of actions.

Ways of thinking are constructed by language, or more specifically, discourse; thus, who controls the discourses within an activity controls the possibilities for the mind and actions of others. Taking the Nigerian situation as an example, the above observation is apt when we consider, on one hand, the attempts of the government to shape the minds of the people, critics, followers, etc. through harsh laws and threatening press statements in order to instigate fear in them; and on the other hand, the followers’ demonstration of the critic’s dissidence to several policies of government, using the social media as a space to pour invectives on their leaders. The intended demystification here could be captured aptly thus: the government of Nigeria is not comfortable with the invectives on public office holders; and the people, in turn, are not satisfied with the performance of the public office holders in Nigeria. The former think more stringent laws would do the magic while the latter think more dissidence and social actions would shape up the public officers. It is on this note that the study takes up an investigation into the language form and function of invective posts in Nigeria that could justify the rationale behind government proposing the social media laws.

3. The Nigerian politician and Entitlement to Respect

Though the Nigerian government as presently constituted is democratic in nature, continuous democratic principles have not taken strong roots. This, obviously has led to discontentment on the part of the governed, leading to constant friction, criticisms and emotional vituperations and invectives from the people to the government. Irrespective of the prevailing situation, the government, represented by the public office holders demand respect from the Nigerian populace as an entitlement that should be accorded governance. This ‘entitlement mentality’ is traceable to traditional leadership styles in many African societies. It is noted that before the amalgamation of many of the traditional kingdoms into what is known today as Nigeria, many kings ruled their people with executive fiat and they were rarely challenged or insulted. According to *Djebab, et al (2003)*, African traditional leaders commanded a lot of respect from their followers and they have considerable influence over the actions of their people. The words of the kings came out as laws immediately they were pronounced as their subjects saw them as direct representatives of the gods. History has glowing accounts of some of the exploits of these great traditional leaders in the past which may suggest why their subjects respected and deified their leadership (cf. Oduwobi, 2003, Phillips, 2011 & Tonwe, and Eke, 2013).

Today, many political leaders in the Nigerian space still see themselves in the light of traditional leaders of the past, demanding absolute respect from the populace without translating their actions to sacrificial leadership. Also, part of the consideration for this attitude in Nigeria is the influence of the long Military rule and its attendant effect. Twenty-one years after the handing over of power from the military to the civilians in a democratic system, the relics of the old military rule is still found in the system of leadership: to command unquestionable executive powers where no citizen can argue or challenge their actions. In the assertion of Frank and Ukpere (2012), the military styles of leadership affect the executive, legislature, the judiciary and the civil society in the current day Nigeria. They state that the values imbibed by the military are manifesting in the practice of the current democracy. This provides the rationale why politicians would wish to lock up dissenting voices without trials or move for harsher laws against dissenting voices.

In this work, the language of dissidence and invectives deployed in the social media is examined from a language theory that captures both language users and the society in which it is used, using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to account for the rationale behind invectives on the social media and the need for politicians to protect themselves from abuses. The study is mainly qualitative as the features of the invective dissidence language is explicated on the basis of face threats based on CDA frames, using screen shots of 10 social media posts from Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook as data presentation.

4. Data Analysis

Below, some of the posts with invective as a form of criticism are analysed on the basis of language use, the implications, and why government may not be able to tolerate such.

Akpabio is a known thief, he was the Ibori in Jonathan govt, collectin money to distribute to governors exactly wat Ibori was doin for Obasanjo 😞 since he hasn't been caught or sent 2 jail, he's feelin like kingkong still arrogant. Glad he exposed the fellow thieves, legisLOOTERS

Extract1

The post above labels the current Minister of the Niger Delta, Akpabio as a thief and likens him to another politician, James Ibori. While the mention of Ibori's name maybe justified as he has been found guilty of money laundering and other related crimes in the United Kingdom, same cannot be said of Akpabio. What is however relatable to Akpabio are the numerous corruption scandals attached to him both as a Governor and as a Minister which no court has ever ruled on. The above post, using invectives, has adjudged Akpabio guilty.

In other climes, derogatory terms used on politicians may be overlooked, but in Nigeria where politicians see themselves as 'demi-gods,' such invectives or name calling is a grave threat to their positive face, therefore, they seek available laws to deal with their critic in order to reduce 'affront' or threat on the face of the politicians. While the masses, especially the youth find succour in the use of the social media in deploying invectives to make the government and politicians respect good governance; the politicians, on the other hand feel threatened by such and are finding ways of stifling it. Since there is no available law explicitly addressing insults on political leader in the context of the social media space, the government feels there is the need to create one to reduce face threat for government.

Q: Why was the only semblance of governance in his 1st tenure about CATTLE, CATTLE, CATTLE, such that the entire 1st term was spent debating what cows will eat, where cows will sleep, where cows will walk...cows, cows, cows?

A: By a natural calling that is almost divine were it not for a miscarriage of destiny, he's a born nomadic herdsman.

Q: Just that? Is that all?

A: No. Also, by natal affiliations, he is the Grand Patron of the umbrella body of cow herders.

Q: Why is he now so focused on RICE such that his 2nd term is now all about RICE, RICE, RICE?

A: Rice Farmers Association paid for his NOMINATION FORM.

Q: Oh! I forgot that!?

Extract 2

Extract 2 is a conversation that is riddled with invectives for the President and his government policies in Agriculture. Even though no name was mentioned in the post, the references to "...in his 1st tenure...", "...the Grand Patron of the umbrella body of cow breeders...", and "...paid for his nomination form" in lines 2, 12 - 14 and 18-19 tie the motive of the invective post to Buhari and his government. The invectives here is inherent in the post's insinuation that Buhari is not qualified for the position of President because naturally, he should have been a nomadic herdsman if not that there was a "*miscarriage of destiny*". (lines 9-10). The post condemns the fact that the attention of the President on the cow breeding is not aimed at national development but to promote the interest of the breeders who chose him as their "*Grand Patron*" line 2. The post also alludes to the Rice Farmers Association as Buhari sponsors in lines 18 - 19 that "... *Rice Farmer Association paid for his NOMINATION FORM...*"; hence, the attention devoted to the issues of rice production in Nigeria. Apart from indirectly insulting the person of the President, the post has deep elements of mockery, which is a face threat to the government of Nigeria with penchant for praise singing. It is, therefore, unexpected that the Nigerian government would rather want to curb such attacks on the social media as its continuation would lead to a bigger problem of mass dissidence in the future.

**I will insult buhari anyhow i choose.
He is a mumu man!**

Extract 3

The above extract captures the main argument of this chapter, which is the fact that many Nigerians deploy the use of invectives on their leaders as a means of expressing their frustrations caused by leadership failure. The above post is a response to some other Nigerians who feel there is a need to respect our leaders because of the political position they occupy or must have occupied. The social handler of this post, like many Nigerians, does not care anymore; he is ready to call out the names of the President and abuse him as seen in the post: "*I will insult Buhari anyhow I choose*", "*He is a mumu man!*" Lines 1 and 2. The word *mumu* is a slang for an individual who is daft and senseless. In fact, a popular website in Nigeria (<https://www.nairaland.com/795973/most-frequently-used-insult-nigeria/2>) refers to the word *mumu* as one of the most frequently used slang insult in Nigeria, therefore, its usage on a sitting President may call for concern on the part of the lawmakers and other policy makers, and would want to seek laws that can prevent such usages.

answer was apparent from the write-up.
 Read from the third paragraph:
 "With Kyari's death, Nigeria is now truly leaderless. Buhari is practically in the land of the living dead. He's a breathing mannequin whose only reason for living is to prove he isn't dead in order to justify

3 98 276

the continuity of the rule in his name. "Abba Kyari ruled the country on Buhari's behalf. In my viral February 22, 2020 column titled, 'The Tragedy of the Abba Kyari Surrogate Presidency,' this line appeared: 'Sometime in the midpoint of last year, a northern retired general told

Extract 4

The post above asserts that the sitting President of Nigeria "...is practically in the land of the living dead..."lines 5-6.He is further referred to in line 7 as a "mannequin", which implies that Nigeria has no leader. The post may, to a large extent, represents the opinion of many on Buhari but a description such as the ones used in the post would not go down well with politicians whose interests are protected by the current state of affairs. Apart from that, a post with insinuating invectives as the ones investigated here threatens the face of the government as a body, and that Buhari as president. Even though, it is a well-known fact that President Buhari has been in and out of hospital on medical ground; the Nigerian government would wish that the people emphasise with him rather than pouring invectives on him and his government. Where subtle engagements for understanding as a face saving act fails, the government would be left with seeking other means of controlling criticism. One of the ways is stifling the media where such criticism emanate from to prevent such invectives as the one in the post above.

Someone should imagine this crowd all armed, definitely we will pursue nizooria aka banana republic the 1st of entire universe to Atlantic ocean. All we ask is peaceful desolation #biafraexit



15 16

OnyeWawa @africatt · 12 Jul
 Replying to @MaziNnamdiKanu
 If you tell yourself a lie several times over it eventually becomes your only truth.

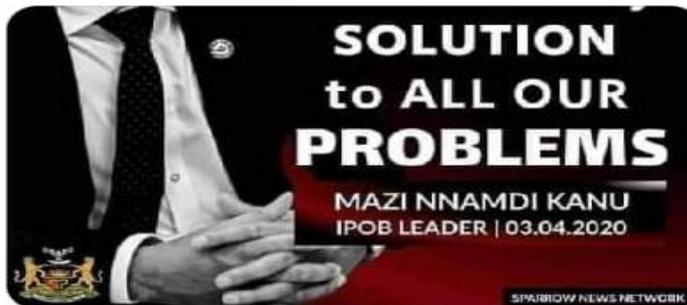
"It never happened."
 This is the position #nigeria has taken on its crimes against #Biafra

Extract 5

The extract above is a subtle call to arms against a sovereign nation by supporters of the *Biafraexit* movement who advocate the secession of the Eastern part of Nigeria to form Biafra. This is similar to what led to the 1970-1973 civil war in Nigeria (cf. Oduwobi, 2003). Since the fresh emergence of Biafra agitation through the leadership of Nnamdi Kanu, there had been serious engagements between the movement and government in form of protest and repression. The above post encourages the group protesting in one of the South Eastern cities to be armed and fight the Nigerian government, referring to Nigeria as a “*banana republic*” line 3 -4 where nothing works. The assertion above is a clear act of dissidence on the part of the post handler who is insulting and threatening the independence of Nigeria and her peaceful coexistence with clear call for the division of sovereign state and the creation of Biafra.

The content of the post in extract 6 below aligns with that of extract 5 above as they both portray acts of dissidence and constitute gross threat to the unity of Nigeria.

We are leaving Nigeria in the shortest possible time. Time for this fake, concocted and deceptive news has gone and there is nothing anybody can do to change our resolve to restore Biafra freedom and independence from Nigeria
***Mazi Nnamdi kanu**
#BiafraExit #BiafraExit #BiafraExit



Extract 6

Since it would be extremely impossible for any government to sit back and allow some of its citizens to cause much hatred and create tendencies that can threaten the unity of the nation; the Nigerian government justifies the proposition of the social media law as an effort aimed at ensuring peace in Nigeria.

Are you aware that the zoo, Africa's biggest crude producer silently devalued its official exchange rate?

Do you know the consequences of borrowing a new \$3.4 billion IMF loan?

Zoo govt. only understands looting and not economic viability

#RejectNigeria

Extract 7

It is a patriotic enterprise to engage in criticism of governance of a nation as this puts government on its toes. However, in as much as there is a room for criticism, there is a larger room for patriotism. In the opinion of Lundberg (2013, p.1), ‘criticism comes from a place of hope, not one of despair. Patriots criticize because they know their nation can be better. But patriots do more than offer opinions. Patriots are people of action, people who actively try and change the wrongs they see in their country’. Criticism on the social media such as the post above with such hashtag as “#RejectNigeria#,” in line 9 is, in every sense, dissenting in nature. The reference to Nigeria as a “*zoo*” in line 1 is a clear affirmation that the social handler and the generation it represents do not believe in the logicity of the Nigerian nation. Though the post offers statistical evidence of borrowing and its consequence on the nation, the tone of the message and the use of invectives and words that threaten the face of the government and the sovereignty of the nation make it a concern to law makers. The handler of this post could justify his action with the fact that successive governments of Nigeria does not respect patriotic and gentle criticisms; rather, the government go after those that attempt to criticize the government. The social media space, therefore, offers a type of distance that allows Nigerians to say what is on their mind as no law enforcement agent is close to apprehend. This is a great challenge to government whose face is threatened, and cannot fold its arms and watch divisive and unpatriotic criticism grow in the social media space, hence the effort to use the social media law as a checking measure.

#JonathanStopCorruption
#JonathanFatherOfCorruption
in Nigeria
#Jonathan_allow_justice_in_Ba
yelsa.

A prodigal son that has done nothing for Bayelsans, insulted like a child by Dickson. You have caused us so much pain and hardship in Bayelsa. Leave Bayelsa Politics to avoid public disgrace.

Extract 8

The post above is full of insult directed to the person of former President Goodluck Jonathan. The handler of the post refers to Jonathan as corrupt, an unjust and a prodigal son. These invectives are presented, not from the point of fact, but as mere misgiving and over running of emotions because no competent court of jurisdiction has found Jonathan guilty of corruption charges to warrant such claims. Furthermore, there is also an angle of threat to the message of the post inclines 10-12 where the handler writes “...*leave Bayelsa politics to avoid public disgrace*”.

The social media space affords young Nigerians an opportunity to criticise their former and current leaders, but there is the need to find the right balance between criticism and outright pouring of invectives laden with emotions and indictments that are capable of causing chaos in the society as portrayed in this post on the former President of Nigeria who deserves protection from his country. If the individual, in this case, the former President, cannot fight back such level of invectives, the state has a moral obligation to do so through the instrumentality of the law.

➡ Forwarded

I doubt if you know that a **COVID-19** sensor has been "inserted" secretly into every phone.

Apparently when everyone was having 'phone disruption' earlier this week, they were adding COVID-19 Tracker to our phones!

If you have an android phone, go under settings then look for google settings and it's there. If you're using an iPhone, go under settings, privacy, then health, it's there but not yet functional.

The app can notify you if you've been near someone who have reported having covid-19.

Check and confirm.

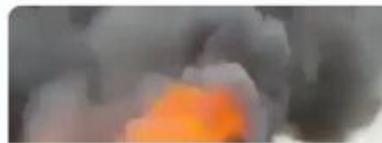
3:40 PM *Extract 9*

The extract above represents a typical viral WhatsApp message constantly shared among Nigerians, containing invectives and outright false and misleading information. It presents outright falsehood on Covid-19 and the implant of chips on phones with the aim of deceiving people and causing panic among uninformed Nigerians. There was a time too in Nigeria, during the outbreak of the Ebola virus, that a viral social media message like this prescribed that people bath with salt to prevent the disease. According to a Premium Times report on August 8, 2014, 'Nigerians are scrambling for salt-water bath for protection from the deadly Ebola virus after a call from the ruler of the Igala Kingdom, the Attah of Igala, prescribing salt solution as a magical vaccine against the virus went viral.' (<https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/166257-ebola-sparks-panic-across-nigeria-as-citizens-scramble-for-salt-water-bath-remedy.html>). The entire directive turned out to be false and about four deaths linked to the saline water bath were recorded in the country. The conspiracy theories about Covid-19 were mostly promoted through the social media platform during the pandemic with government devoting huge amount of time and financial resources to combat the falsehood when it came up. Much as there is the desire for freedom of expression, government cannot afford to allow people to abuse the freedom unchecked. Therefore, the need for a law to prevent perpetration of falsehood, especially on the social media.

"In a swift moment of needless impulse, Peter Obi bundled some northerners, mostly those who engaged in menial jobs for survival & marched them in trailer load back to their base. To him, these guys had no business being in Anambra State."

YORUBA people set IGBO building materials on fire in Lagos, because we voted for PDP. They are Led by MC OLUOMO and they are burning our Properties! And Banned IGBOS not to open their shops now in Lagos! Both in OSHODI, OKOTA, AGUDA, ODUADE, EVIRONS.

Make sure this goes viral



Extract 10

This section on the analysis of randomly selected data is ended with a major aspect why language use on the internet may be regulated. The two pictures above represent false information that were posted on the social media space regarding the 2019 elections. The first claims that Dr Peter Obi, the Vice-Presidential candidate of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP) sent Northerners back to their states of origin as a Governor of Anambra State. The second, using fire image, claims that Igbo people were being attacked by hoodlums during the 2019 elections. The intention of the posts is to draw ethnic sentiments and hatred against some of the principal actors during the elections. In the case of Peter Obi, the post is aimed at turning Northerners against him during the election as someone that cannot tolerate their 'brothers' in his state. It is a dubious demarketing post, portraying Peter Obi an ethnic zealot.

The intention of the media handler of the second post is to falsely draw pity from the public on the side of the Igbo people, making it look like the Igbo people were being attacked on the basis of the choices they have made during elections.

Both posts are capable of causing great confusion and chaos in the system. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) in a study on the Nigerian elections found out that 'mis- and disinformation campaigns have been used to influence political agendas. The study went on to note that false information in the social media in electioneering times, leads 'to a distrust among social media users because that's where they find 'fake news' most often. While using of invectives and sharing false information may be ways by which Nigerians express their frustrations about the general lawlessness in the nation; it would be extremely rare to find a government at any level or clime that would sit back and watch the level of anarchy and chaos that such posts may cause and do nothing about it.

5. Discussion of Findings

The remoteness of the handlers of the social media makes it possible for the use of invective dissident language laden with emotions, which they would have been unable to use if the people they were criticising were physically present. This aligns with Brown and Levinson (1978) postulation that face can easily be threatened if the relational distance of participants in a conversation is far. This finding has been relatively expanded in terms of organisation and team/group communication. It is discovered that people tend to relate more cordially with those they see on a regular basis. This also applies when there are disputes, which may be resolved in a more peaceful manner (cf. Kraut & Streeter, 1995, Kiesler and Cummings 2002).

The study found out that dissident language could be described as the opposite of patriotism, and could be justified on the basis of frustration on the part of the followers because their leaders have repeatedly failed them. Merry (2018, 32) notes that when there is no 'affection or loyalty or when the participants in the special relationship fail in some way, the intensity of the disappointment, frustration, and even moral outrage is felt most intensely, given that the bonds of intimacy and trust in some way have been violated.' This explains the situation of most young Nigerians on the trajectory of development in the nation; which has not been encouraging. Their frustration is observed in the dissident language they deploy for communication on the social media. It may be argued that being patriotic ensures continued support for one's nation; but the use of invective as a form of dissident language is justified by an earlier finding by Hedges (2010, 26) where he notes that the 'uniformity of opinion, moulded by the media is reinforced through the skilfully orchestrated mass emotions of nationalism and patriotism, which paint all dissidents as 'soft' or 'unpatriotic.' The 'patriotic' citizen,' continues, plagued by fear of job losses and possible terrorist attacks and unfailingly supports widespread surveillance and the militarized state.' On the contrary, the data analysed in this study shows that the use of invectives in most cases, are aimed at shaming the politicians for a possible change in their nature or to act a deterrent to the others. It is actually not aimed at bringing the nation down but to improve it through the act of shaming on the social media. However, the conflict is in the fact that politicians in Nigeria are not ready for such a shaming act, hence, the need to kill it at the infant stage before it grows.

The study also finds out that the falsehood shared on the social media space in Nigeria are usually intentional; aimed at political gains, using religious and ethnic colourations. This aligns with Ireton and Posetti (2018, 8) postulation that those that spread disinformation prey on the vulnerability or partisan potential of recipients whom they hope to enlist as amplifiers and multipliers. With this, they look for ways to make innocent persons the conduits for their messages. As seen in the analysis, the political, ethnic and religious tension is high in Nigeria, creating breeding ground for fake news to grow. Many persons innocently share fake news owing to their loyalty to a political movement, an ethnic group or a religious body.

The present study is of the opinion that the chaos attached to fake news may be difficult for the government to ignore without making moves for changes in the regulation. Also, a study of the language of invectives reveals that the chaos it causes, together with the falsehood may justify the need for new laws to protect the government and other citizens.

6. Conclusion

This study argues that the disturbing nature of social media posts with invectives and dissidence language in Nigeria are the main reasons why the government seeks new regulations. This is coming from the background that many Nigerians are frustrated by leadership failures in the past, and the fact that most Nigerian politicians do not take 'harsh' criticisms or the acts of shaming lightly. Using the face theory of Brown and Levinson (1978), the study analysed randomly selected social media posts by Nigerians in order to reveal the extent to which invectives and dissidence language may justify social media gagging.

The study reveals, amongst others, that the use of insults, the preaching of division and the chaos caused by fake news may justify government position on strict regulations.

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