Social media and cultural violence in northern Nigeria

Lorimer, Shannon

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Social media and cultural violence in northern Nigeria

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Shannon Lorimer
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Supervisor: Prof. dr. Mirjam de Bruijn
Second reader: Prof. dr. Chibuike Uche

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1. Abstract

Although international media houses have focused on Boko Haram as the biggest contributor to violence in northern Nigeria, ethnic conflict has caused significantly more casualties in the past few years. This instability has been exacerbated by increases in criminality, terrorism, desertification, and drought that has changed land-use patterns. I argue that the rapid increase in access to Information and Communication Technologies, and especially social media, has created violent conditions by enabling discursive warfare in online spaces, where incendiary rhetoric circulates and is consumed faster than older media forms like newspapers or radio. Using the concept of cultural violence (Galtung 1990) as an umbrella term, this thesis will discuss how the presence of prominent societal norms and ideas legitimize violent discourses and dangerous speech online, which are continuously reinforced and reproduced. In Nigeria, online discourses reveal how dominant beliefs and ethnic labels have become so embedded within the culture that they function as absolute and remain uncontested. As these ideologies spread exponentially on social media, alongside other fake news or misinformation from local news organisations, this has the potential to normalise direct violence. My thesis will focus on this discursive warfare online, and will not attempt to explain how or whether it translates to direct violence because the ramifications of cultural violence are often not immediately visible, but persist and prevail more insidiously, over a longer period of time.

2. Introduction

Problem statement

In the past decade, ethnic violence and terrorism have increased rapidly in northern Nigeria. In the first half of 2020, there were more attacks by ISWAP and Fulani extremists than all of those recorded in 2019. The violent conflict between herders and farmers can be attributed in part to land use issues, worsened by droughts, desertification and overpopulation. This has caused thousands of fatalities in recent years (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020: 68). In recent years, the role of social media has been highlighted in exacerbating these tensions in online spaces, by facilitating cultural violence through enabling a discursive environment that encourages dangerous speech and violent rhetoric. This sentiment is expressed on a variety of social media platforms and becomes more and more embedded within the culture and begins to function as absolute (Galtung, 1990). However, the position the government occupies within the tension is complex, as President Muhammed Buhari is regarded by many outside the north as being too "soft" on Fulani herders (International Crisis Group, 2021). In this thesis, I will not discuss Nigerian politics on the ground but rather will focus on what is happening in digital communication circles. My research aims to understand the environment on social media, and the presence of cultural violence as a discursive war that forms part of the violent conditions in Nigeria.

The context in northern Nigeria and ethnicization of the conflict

Although mainstream media tends to focus on insurgency groups as the biggest cause of the endemic conflict in northern Nigeria, ethnic violence claims even more civilian casualties annually (Cochran, 2020: 9). Nigeria's northern states have been beset with the conflict between different ethnic and religious groups and farmers and herders spanning three decades (International Crisis Group, 2011). However, a spike in criminality in the region, compounded with the emergence of jihadist groups, has significantly exacerbated the violence. In the last decade, an estimated 8000 people were killed and over 200 000 people displaced, often moving into the Niger delta to escape the conflict (Cochran, 2020: 9). This violence has been ongoing without signs of reprieve and has become a common topic on social media platforms. The most common sentiment expressed here scapegoats all Fulani people, accusing them of terrorism, murder and theft.

The violence between farmers and herders is partially a result of drought, desertification and human impacts on the environment that have changed land-use patterns. Increases in population have heightened land scarcity issues and food insecurity. Mobile herders use extensive areas of land for grazing, and as the population grows and demand for agricultural land increases, pastoral migration zones are becoming limited by landowners taking up more surface area (International Crisis Group, 2021). Existing religious and ethnic tensions also play into this conflict (Cochran, 2020: 10). The herders in Nigeria are predominantly Fulani and came to be there after their ancestors migrated to the region over several centuries. They are considered by many to be settlers and are recognised as an ethnic group, although their identity is intricate and diverse. Because the Fulani people are nomadic, they are often not seen as having a homeland and as nomads, cannot claim the land, but can only claim space. This prescription of rights according to indigeneity creates tension and power struggles between the indigenous farmers and the Fulani herders (Cochran, 2020: 9). This issue has been heightened as more land becomes designated for cultivation and farming, and Fulani herdsman encroach on this land. Additionally, many herds belong to politicians and rich merchants, but their cattle are tended to and herded by Fulani people, increasing land scarcity issues (International Crisis Group, 2021). This insecurity has been exploited by jihadist groups, as well as politician's campaigns, many of whom use social media as a platform to take advantage of the conflict for political gain (International Crisis Group, 2011).

Role of social media

This violence has coincided with the proliferation of access to social media. Where most literature has previously focused on the role of climate change, desertification or government instability in driving the conflict, some scholars have suggested that there is a correlation between the escalation of violence in the Sahel region and the increase in internet accessibility.

Research on the role of social media in conflict in other countries posits that such platforms are exacerbating tensions by enabling a violent discursive area. In Nigeria, advancements in new Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) over the past decade, and specifically social media, have allowed a diverse group of political figures to rise to prominence, transforming society networks and the dynamics of power relations between governments and rebel or militia groups. Social media facilitates and connects these networks of militias, jihad groups and military groups, allowing the spread of hate speech and discriminatory discourses that can perpetuate prejudices and encourage cultural violence.

While advancements in digital media have been pivotal in facilitating and mobilising protests in some cases, they have also provided a platform for the dissemination of misinformation and cultural violence (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020). Individuals now have more access to elite members of society and politicians and are not bound by limitations like time or place (Zeitoff, 2018: 1971). Media allows conflicts to emerge and can foster the construction or implementation of group divides between religious groups or ethnic groups (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020). Many of these divides are visible in the prominent beliefs about certain ethnic groups that have become so entrenched in the culture of the country that they are now regarded by many as absolute, and make have the potential to make direct violence seem acceptable (Galtung, 1990).

Politicians also operate social media accounts with relative freedom to broadcast their views and push an agenda among their followers. This allows them to encourage hate and incite violence. The Nigerian government and its military are active on social media too, but not neutral, visible recently as President Muhammed Buhari callously threatened a repeat of the Biafran Civil War, and after his Tweet was deleted by Twitter, banned the platform nationwide (BBC News, 2021). These developments, coupled with the existing tensions in northern Nigeria, may have significantly exacerbated the conflict.

Research objectives

My research aims to understand the role of social media in exacerbating cultural violence. I investigated this question through online ethnography, and have used the concepts of cultural violence, representation, extreme and dangerous speech to explain how a violent discursive environment is created online. My research focuses on the social media aspect of the media ecosystem. I aim to understand how social media is used to enable a violent discursive environment, where the discourses are public and so people are able to subscribe, respond to and confirm ethnic labels or prejudices. My objective is also to understand the online discourses in the context of historically rooted identity markers used to label ethnic groups and encourage violent speech and perpetuate prejudices. I will also apply the concepts of "extreme" or "dangerous" speech, forms of hate speech that actively encourage violence, to understand how through portraying and sending subjective messages on social media networks, various figures indoctrinate their audiences and mobilise support for their causes online, often playing on religious or ethnic stereotypes, for example, that Fulani people are members of Boko Haram, and exploiting anti-government rhetoric and political instability (Nieuwkerk, 2019: 249).

Research question

The consequences of this ethnic labelling are difficult to isolate, and while some scholars have suggested this has led to an increase in violence against civilians based on suspicions of ties to bandit or jihadist groups, I have not found evidence of this, and rather my research will explore the kind of online environment that has been enabled. My findings reflect the discursive environment online and do not attempt to identify or explain how this violence online corresponds with violence on the ground. my research aims to answer these questions:

- How is social media providing a megaphone for misinformation and normalising prejudices and ethnic labelling?
- Is this enabling discursive warfare in online spaces?
- What discourses are used to mobilise supporters and encourage hate or dangerous speech online?

- How do different groups and individual actors in the conflict use Twitter, WhatsApp and Telegram to share their messages and push an agenda that encourages their followers to subscribe, accept and circulate violent discourses?

I will begin by conducting a literature review to discuss the academic articles on social media in conflict, cultural violence and on the conflict in northern Nigeria that I will use to inform my work. I will then identify the theoretical framework I will use, including theory from conflict studies and media studies, to discuss my findings and outline the role of social media in conflict. In the next chapter, I will explain the research methodology I have used to gather empirical evidence in the digital space. The following chapter will explore the historical context and current climate in northern Nigeria and sketch both the news and social media landscapes in Nigeria at present. I will then present my findings from my online ethnography to discuss the presence of cultural violence, and conclude by positing that social media has enabled discursive warfare.

This violent conflict which has plagued northern Nigeria for decades, and escalated significantly alongside the proliferation of access to ICTs, has seen ethnic labelling that has resulted in one group being scapegoated in online spaces for all criminality and terrorism in the region. I will aim to explain this phenomenon by drawing on theory from conflict studies and media studies.

3. Theoretical deliberations: social media and conflict

Although there is a surplus of literature on the role of social media in conflict, revolution and insurgencies, many of these articles do not speak to the role of social media in the Sahel region, and even less in Nigeria. I have therefore used a combination of literature on the role of social media in conflict and literature on Nigeria to inform my research and theoretical framework. I have used academic articles discussing the role of conflict with case studies on developing countries to provide context while engaging with the differences between those environments and my region of focus, as well as the time frame and the type of conflict. Existing scholarship on the ethnic conflict in northern Nigeria focuses predominantly on the role of desertification, political instability, and food and job insecurity as causes of the violence, where my research aims to investigate how social media now facilitates and exacerbates online violence by aiming to understand discourses on public social media sites.

I will also approach the topic from a conflict studies lens, using the concept of cultural violence as pioneered by Johan Galtung (1990) as an umbrella term. The use of the concept of cultural violence to analyse the role of ICTs is drawn from Mirjam De Bruijn's (2020) proposal on "Disruptive connectivity in the Sahel". The idea of cultural violence stems from conflict studies, and refers to a part of a culture, like a language, religion, or ideology, that can be used to justify or legitimise direct violence. It represents the presence of prominent or lasting social norms that make structural violence seem normal, natural or acceptable. This illuminates how these prevailing beliefs become so embedded or entrenched in a culture that they are taken as absolute and natural, and reproduced without question throughout generations (Galtung 1990: 294). This highlights how social media provides a platform for these religious and ethnic prejudices and labels to be expressed, reinforcing historically rooted identity constructions. This concept explains how the violence is symbolic and enshrined within a culture, and does not inflict harm in itself, but has the potential to create violent conditions or make the conflict seem more normal. I will focus on cultural violence, one of the corners of the conflict triangle. The other points of the triangle are direct violence, which is physical and structural violence, which refers to indirect violence, often part of an unequal structure that limits access to basic human needs, resulting in death or disease that could have been avoidable. Each point of the triangle can be connected to the other two (Galtung 1990: 292).

According to Galtung (1990: 295), despite the correlations between the three types of violence, each violence carries a distinct relation to time. Direct violence refers to an event, structural violence connotes a process and cultural violence is a more permanent feature or “invariant”, which rarely changes over long periods of time because of the nature of culture and the way it changes or develops slowly. This is visible in the rhetoric that exists in online spaces in Nigeria, that may not culminate in direct violence immediately, but serve to maintain and strengthen prejudices and blanket generalisations that normalise direct violence over time (Galtung 1990: 295).

Representation and discourses in online spaces

The concept of representation, and within this, identity construction, illuminates the articulation and construction of ethnic identities in online spaces. I will use Hall (1997) to engage in how meaning is ascribed and derived, including how these meanings are not fixed. Despite the fact that this literature is not that recent and was not written about online spaces, it is relevant in understanding the construction of knowledge and meaning within public domains, in this case online. According to Stuart Hall (1997), representation is the process through which people within a society or culture use language in the form of signs and signifiers to construct meaning. My research findings reflect on the challenges of representation in a society where differing cultural practices and conceptual maps have been used as tools for discrimination, and where discourses on ethnicity have been used to justify this discrimination. Using these ideas on representation, I will discuss knowledge, power and discourse, to explore the historical and current narrative constructed by colonialism and years of conflict that categorises all Fulani people as violent. This discourse has not been contested enough and has become what Foucault describes as a regime of truth (Hall, 1997).

I use the concepts of “dangerous speech” of “extreme speech” which aim to understand and qualify the term “hate speech” through an anthropological framework. “Extreme speech” focuses on what people do that is connected to the media and thereby prevents the tendency to presuppose the impact of negative and hateful online discourses. Pohjjonen and Udupa (2017) posit that scholars of political communication and debate on regulation often make guesses about politeness or volatility being universal within communication with minimal variation between different cultures. They argue that online discourses instead are formed according to the different cultural and political environments. Therefore, the concept of extreme speech acknowledges the constant ambiguity of different discourse milieus. Hate speech usually features the disparagement of other groups or individuals based on their identity (Pohjjonen and Udupa, 2017). Two main characteristics of hate speech include the dehumanising of people from other groups and targeting members of the other group to reinforce barriers between the in-group and the out-group (Pohjjonen and Udupa, 2017). Social media provides a platform for this kind of speech and reinforces these barriers and hate speech.

The role of social media

Media studies literature on the role of social media discusses how advances in internet technology have made the internet more interactive. It enables the user to access information, share it online, and generate content with fewer constraints (Creeber and Martin, 2008). The new channels of communication that have been opened, in conjunction with globalisation and the rapid movement of ideas and thoughts across borders, have created a far more culturally diverse world. According to Creeber and Martin (2008), this facilitates a more “participatory culture” that provides a platform for audiences to become more involved in the distribution of information and produce it themselves. This changes the way people derive meaning from things and alters how they articulate their identities and talk about other identities (Brooks and Hébert, 2006). These advances, coupled with technological advancements that have made mobile phones cheaper and more accessible, have changed the way people produce and consume information, meaning that fake news and violent discourses and prejudices can exist online relatively unchecked and unregulated and can be consumed and accepted by users (Brooks and Hébert, 2006).

Unlike traditional media, new media allows individuals to communicate and participate in discourses transcending barriers of time and place, without relying on mainstream media houses for information (Spaiser, 2017: 133). Although digital media, and subsequently social media, has changed significantly in the past few years, this does not mean literature from the beginning of the decade or even of the century is outdated or irrelevant. ICTs are a feature of today's "new media" in the same way that radio or television was "new" at one time (Gitelman and Pingree, 2003). Therefore, the phrases "new" and "old" can be seen as relative and should be used with caution. This also highlights questions that I pursue about the connotations of the term "new" in dynamics between media societies, as well as the role of the medium used to portray the message in the reception of the message (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). This will consult the ideas of prominent media studies theorist, Marshall McLuhan, and his assertion that the form a message is conveyed in, shapes its perception.

Media in conflict

According to Zeitoff (2017: 1972), academics within the field of political violence have not fully embraced the impact of new communication technology. Rather, attention has been paid to the role of new weapons on the battlefield, including intercontinental ballistic missiles and drones. These weaponry developments have significantly changed the dynamics of warfare and the balance of power, but the effects of new communication technologies are less direct (Zeitoff, 2017: 1972). The focus on weaponry advancements has distracted from those in communication technology, and the way these new technologies have changed how individuals are mobilised for protests or rebellion and how political leaders engage in wars and diplomacy (Zeitoff, 2017: 1972). I will also use the notion of the weaponization of social media, which explores the idea that despite the opportunities offered by new digital technologies, they can also be drivers of exploitation, conflict and persecution (Gray and Guay, 2019: 6). The spread of misinformation is not a new issue and existed through in-person communication and older media forms too, but social media facilitates conflict in unique ways. The weaponization of social media sees oppressive governments, militias and insurgency groups now using advanced methods and digital tools to distort information and control the narrative (Gray and Guay, 2019: 6). The goals here are frequently to provoke incendiary rhetoric, undermine authorities, prevent social cohesion and spread fear and violence. Civilians contribute to these discourses and processes, intentionally or unintentionally, and facilitate these networks that have the potential to incite violence (Gray and Guay, 2019: 6).

The weaponization of social media can be understood through political manipulation, hate speech online, and radicalisation. These three tenets are all visible in northern Nigeria. Political manipulation refers to the misinformation used to manipulate and control political discourse, reduce the power of democratic institutions and strengthen the power of the government (Gray and Guay, 2019: 6). In Nigeria, this is visible in the ruling party's treatment of the Biafra party by classifying them as a terrorist organisation and publicly threatening their members with a repeat of the 1967 civil war. The ban of Twitter also reveals this tendency to silence critics to control the narrative (Gray and Guay, 2019: 6). Social media platforms facilitate and spread hate or extreme speech in already fragile environments, allowing individuals and groups to exploit existing concerns, tensions and grievances. They also strengthen violent actors advertently and unintentionally. By pushing narratives that accuse ethnic groups of perpetrating violence, and encouraging vigilante action against these groups, the indiscriminate targeting of entire ethnic groups based on suspicion of guilt is encouraged. While my research does not speaj to the results of this mobilisation on the ground, it analyses the violence of the discourses in online spaces. The third tenet, radicalisation, is also present in Nigeria, visible through the use of inexpensive social media platforms to radicalise and recruit civilians in terrorist organisations through exploiting the reach and anonymity of digital technologies.

Although social media can be central to beginning revolutions or protest movements, it can also be used by government forces to discredit, defame and demobilise opposition groups. I will use Spaiser et al (2017) to discuss and analyse discourses on Twitter and WhatsApp and how these discourses influence public opinion. This article, "Communication power struggles on social media: A case study of the 2011–12 Russian protests" discusses the role of social media and provides insight into the use of Twitter in manipulating political discourses online. The Internet provides a platform for propaganda campaigns and influences how individuals view and interpret political ideas and figures. Even though one group does not have the monopoly on popularity on the internet, there are groups with more resources to manipulate the discourse to their advantage (Spaiser et al, 2017: 133). Thomas Zeitzoff's (2017) article, "How Social Media Is Changing Conflict" resonates with my research as it discusses the dynamics of conflict and revolutionary activities in an environment influenced heavily by social media. Although this article does not reference Nigeria, it discusses how media has changed the dynamics of conflict, with a focus on the role of social media in exacerbating political violence.

Ingrid Kummels' (2020) chapter, "An Ayuujk 'Media War' over Water and Land: Mediatised Senses of Belonging between Mexico and the United States in Theorising Media and Conflict ties in with these ideas. This chapter discusses the conflict in Mexico over land and resources between different communities, and how social media is changing the dynamics. Although this study takes place on a different continent, there are still relevant conclusions because of the ethnic tensions that are exacerbated by social media, and the role of colonialism in creating this divided environment and subsequently endemic violence (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020).

Although there has been an increase in academic research on Boko Haram in recent decades, there remains a gap of knowledge about key elements of the conflict, including their use of new ICTs and discourses they use and that are used to discuss them (Olabode, 2018). According to Olabode's (2018) article on the insurgent's use of ICTs, social media was pivotal for the organisation in disseminating propaganda. Literature on Nigeria presently focuses on explaining the instability in northern Nigeria that allows terrorist groups to flourish. Umar and Erhardt (2018) and Agbiboa (2021) describe the instability, the evolution of Boko Haram and the rise of civilian militias to compensate for perceived inaction from the government. These narratives do not speak directly to the role of social media in facilitating the scapegoating of Fulani people online but revealed the tensions at play and allowed me to build ideas for my theoretical discussion and analysis of my data.

While there is substantial literature on the role of social media in revolution and conflict, there is a gap in the literature with regards to the role of social media in creating violent online environments in northern Nigeria. I will therefore use concepts including cultural violence, representation and extreme speech, coupled with literature and newspaper articles on the region, to discuss how social media changes the dynamics of identity construction and articulation, and how it can contribute to and allow the perpetuation of ethnic labelling and prejudice.

Representation

The concept of representation can be used in understanding perceptions and constructions of identities in online spaces, especially those of Fulani people. Representation can be defined as the production of meaning and how this is communicated among people (Hall, 1997: 15). In recent years, this has become increasingly integral to the study of culture (Hall, 1997: 15). I will adopt a constructivist standpoint to define representation, rather than an intentional or reflective approach, as constructivism is currently the most relevant in terms of its contribution to cultural studies (Hall, 1997: 15). Constructivism purports that language, in its various forms, constructs or produces meaning (Hall, 1997: 15). Language is not limited to the spoken word, but includes a variety of systems of signs, codes, and images that represent something (Hall, 1997: 16). To represent something involves portraying it, thinking of it, or recalling a similar theme or idea in one's mind (Hall, 1997: 16). This production of meaning is a key aspect in understanding the relationship between knowledge, power and discourse.

Knowledge, power and discourse

The relationship between knowledge and power makes an assumption about the authority of a truth, which by being the most dominant, uncontested discourse becomes capable of making itself truth (Hall, 1997: 45). Ideas and knowledge, when exercised frequently in everyday realities, will have an influence and if popular or not contested by competing discourses, will be taken as truth (Hall, 1997: 45). This can be seen through conceptions of ethnic groups, including Fulani people, which are constructed and perceived by individuals based on their knowledge and conceptual maps (Hall, 1997: 18). This knowledge and these conceptual maps are heavily influenced by social media. Foucault discusses how what is common knowledge about something or what people think they know, facilitates the regulation or attitude towards that thing (Hall, 1997: 45). Knowledge does not exist in isolation, it is exercised and applied in various historical and institutional contexts (Hall, 1997: 45). Therefore, to study attitudes towards something, one must gain a full understanding of how discourse and knowledge have resulted in this attitude, perceptions, practices around it and historical attitudes towards it (Hall, 1997: 45). This kind of truth is not necessarily an absolute truth, but rather what Foucault describes as a regime of truth because dominant discourses around it have constructed it as the absolute truth (Hall, 1997: 45). The construction of Fulani people in Nigeria, or in the Sahel region as a whole, can be regarded as a regime of truth. This discourse about Fulani people working with Boko Haram or being guilty of banditry or murder has become an accepted regime of truth on social media platforms. This enables violent discursive environments which have the potential to influence consumers of this information and their behaviour.

Influence of discourses on behaviour

Discourses influence behaviour in a variety of ways. In some cases, they can inspire violence or provide reasons and legitimise it. In some cases, discourses and ideas can motivate the decision to be violent, to exercise restraint or to justify doing either. The more ‘participatory culture’ of social media platforms that allow audiences to become more involved in the distribution of information and produce it themselves changes the way people derive meaning from things and alters how they articulate their identities (Brooks and Hébert, 2006: 298).

Media consumers tend to decide what is important based on the way things are conveyed by media institutions (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). The way mainstream media has represented values and identities has historically played a vital role in how consumers come to perceive things. This forms a media ecosystem, where a complex message system, like social media, will enforce certain ways of thinking, being and behaving (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967). Race, gender, religion, ethnicity and other aspects of one's identity are constructed and reproduced by media influences. According to Brooks and Hébert (2006: 298), media is central to the representations of social imaginaries and realities. They regard cultural studies as the most relevant and constructive way to address concepts of media and culture, and within that, race and gender in the media (Brooks and Hébert: 2006: 298).

In 2002, David Gauntlett (2003: 5) wrote that modern individuals consumed hours and hours of television on a weekly basis, as well as media in the form of magazines, newspapers, movies, advertising and on the Internet. In 2021, this remains partially true. People are now consuming an even larger variety of news from a variety of places, many of these are via the Internet. Social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are responsible for a lot of the advertising people see, movies are now more frequently watched online than on the television, and even much of the news people consume is received through one's various social media accounts (Kata, 2012: 3778). Furthermore, much of this content is generated by independent producers or writers, and even more of it is not verified or factual. This does not make Gauntlett's article irrelevant, rather it means that what he spoke about in 2002 has been heightened. People are consuming more information than ever and are going to be influenced by these media ecosystems (Gauntlett, 2003: 6). Gauntlett (2003: 6) writes that the media reveals relationships and events separate to or foreign from one's own, which will inevitably affect the way people perceive themselves and how they perceive and expect others to be. Much of what is seen online become reference points for aspects of the consumers' lives. Even when people receive information with the knowledge that it is unrealistic or inaccurate, Gauntlett (2003: 6) says it is still likely to influence the way people construct their reality. With the rise of social media, these ideals and societal constructs are no longer limited to what magazines or newspapers people read, and rather people are forced to consume this information just by being active on social media.

While social media leads to the influx of a wide variety of information, it often also results in the influx of a lot of unverified and inaccurate information. Although distinguishing between information that is true and that which is false can be done, younger and older audiences especially are less able to sift through the information and are often quick to believe fake news (Kata, 2012: 3778). Most social media sites do have some filters, but these only work to remove information or images that are inappropriate, and not those that are untrue, and will only flag content that may contain errors (Kata, 2012: 3778).

Benesch and Maynard (2016) posit that humans have the agency to act independently when receiving and interpreting this information, and dangerous ideology and speech are not the only causes for violence, but they do play a clear role. Evidence of an individual committing an act of violence based on a particular speech is not easy to find, however, educated context-based guesses can be made about the effects or consequences of a discourse or rhetoric (Benesch and Maynard, 2016: 76). A study conducted in Nigeria in 2007 by ActionAid International Nigeria assessed the effects of anti-violence dialogue and campaigning on political violence during national and local elections and found that the campaigning significantly reduced the violence (Benesch and Maynard, 2016: 76). There is still a need for more research on the relationship between discourse, ideology and violence. But scholars do recognise that mass violence or genocides do not happen in isolation, and rather reflect a series of long, and usually non-linear series of radicalising events or moments (Benesch and Maynard, 2016: 76). Youths who are radicalised are in some ways the exception because they are more likely to behave violently because they are ordered to do so (Benesch and Maynard, 2016: 76).

Many of the discourses on social media globally have moved increasingly to the “dark side” of new media and facilitated hate speech, misinformation, and violence. These violent sentiments pose a significant risk to the relative freedom of speech online in most cultures. However, the notion that these discourses pose a threat to local or national security has also been exploited by governments to legitimise tightening controls and regulations of the internet. This growing concern over unregulated negative discourses is visible through the numerous policy debates on an international level. It is especially prominent in Nigeria, where a temporary suspension of Twitter was announced for the country on 5 June 2021 (BBC News, 2021). The ban was announced after Twitter deleted several Tweets by Nigerian President Muhammed Buhari, in which he warned the predominantly Igbo south-eastern people of Nigeria of a potential second Biafran Civil War (BBC News, 2021). According to the Nigerian government, the ban on Twitter was partly because these Tweets were deleted, but mostly because of "a litany of problems with the social media platform in Nigeria, where misinformation and fake news spread through it have had real-world violent consequences" (BBC News, 2021). However, many have seen this move as a censorship of the platform by Buhari.

The nature of power and discourse allows the creation of regimes of truth, which can breed erroneous discourses that are reconstructed through generations without being contested. These discourses can be seen as extreme speech and enable violent discursive environments. As advancements in ICTs make social media more accessible, these online environments carry more pernicious influences.

Advancements in social media

Although new digital technologies often seem to offer new possibilities to empower and provide a platform for marginalised groups or individuals, even online these technologies still form part of a power system that facilitates an uneven distribution of power and resources and can still be exploited by governments or anyone with the resources to use these technologies to their own advantage (Castells, 2009: 52). This has a profound impact on politics, and especially on conflict zones. Access to new ICTs in Nigeria is rapidly increasing, although low literacy levels and subsequently low digital literacy levels mean that a digital divide is strikingly apparent. Efforts from international technology companies to increase infrastructure and access have resulted in 42 percent of the population using the internet with access to social media, according to the most recent statistics available (The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency, 2021).

Current research on the role of social media in conflict has interrogated a variety of environments, including revolutions, protests, religious and civil wars (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 14). Although this research has produced different results, a common finding has been that new social media platforms allow more avenues for more diverse communication patterns than traditional media, although the extent to which these ICTs are used differs among different contexts (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 14). This research has also highlighted how social media and conflict cannot easily be dichotomised and rather share a dialectical relationship where the social, political and cultural dynamics of the conflict shape and are shaped by the social media practice. Many findings also suggest that social media is only a single aspect of a wider, complex network of different forms of media, and the relationship between these new forms of social media and traditional forms of media form an intricate “hybrid media ecosystem” (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 15).

According to Galtung (1969), structural violence is more than just physical violence and is embedded in social structures that constantly reproduce and exacerbate inequalities of power and self-determination. Within these structures, anthropologists recognise the roots of the conflicts and the influence of local actors in the conflict, because creativity and agency are as necessary for the production of conflict and violence as they are for peacebuilding efforts (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 15). Information and communication technologies are used to produce and mediate physical violence, including through visualization of violence and through adding to cultural violence in terms of access to media, literacy and representation of people in conflict (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 15).

Social media provides a platform for an increasing range of people, but there are still challenges in how to gain an audience for these previously marginalised voices (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 14). The issue of whose voices gain traction, and on which media platform, reflect dynamics of power and representation and raise questions that were relevant 10 years ago, although on different media platforms (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 14). This means that ordinary citizens or politicians have a platform to disseminate misinformation and exploit existing tensions (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 14). Despite the expansive nature of the internet, interaction on social media platforms is often tailored by the individual algorithms for each user, and so it has become increasingly easy for one to exist within an echo chamber where similar rhetoric is repeated without being challenged.

Social media's increasing prominence in politics and conflict

Social media has played an increasingly large role in prominent international events, like Donald Trump galvanising support using platforms like Twitter as a campaign tool in the 2016 elections in the USA, or the rise of ISIS through using social media to gain supporters in the West and build their movement (Zeitoff, 2017: 1971). Yet as these moments have compelled policymakers and scholars to recognise how influential social media is, they have also raised questions about how social media is shaping conflict and what mechanisms it is using (Zeitoff, 2017: 1971).

Social media allows users to search for information and generate and share their own content with their networks (Zeitoff, 2017: 1972). Algorithms within social media create individual feeds of news and posts and present suggestions on whom to follow based on their activity or interests. This also means that content is targeted at or specialised for specific audiences, allowing an agenda to be pushed and people to remain in echo chambers (Zeitoff, 2017: 1971). Through platforms like Twitter, social media users can interact through hashtags or directly with previously inaccessible audiences beyond their network. The speed with which messages and posts can be shared on social media has also changed the dynamics of the news cycle by enabling some stories to "trend" and receive a wide following more quickly (Zeitoff, 2017: 1971).

According to Castells (2009), communication is central to power. Communication networks allow groups to exchange or send information, plan protests and mobilise participants and hold authority figures accountable (Zeitoff, 2017: 1975). Social media allows these processes to happen even faster, with some scholars arguing that social media can provide a platform to publicise the wrongs perpetrated by a regime, making social media a "liberation technology".

The ease of access and minimal expenses of social media allows activists or watchdogs to connect and coordinate with others to plan, fundraise and "hack" protests (Zeitoff, 2017: 1975).

When issues of identity are involved, conflict and peace dynamics and processes are usually embedded in culture and religious symbolism and traditions (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 15). These rituals and symbols can easily be manipulated to galvanise support and push people to take up arms or towards peacebuilding efforts and allow social control. These symbols can produce a variety of responses and associations. This means symbols can be used and manipulated for reconciliation or conflict (Budka and Bräuchler, 2020: 15).

My research argues that the latter has been the case in northern Nigeria, as religion, ethnicity, language and political instability have been exploited to incite violent discourses online from and against a variety of groups. As the access to social media has rapidly increased in Nigeria since 2012, insurgency groups, national military groups, and militias have gained access to social media platforms that allow them to reach large audiences and encourage or legitimise violence against their enemies (Nieuwkerk, 2019: 250). By evaluating online behaviour and the reception of information or misinformation, I aim to investigate the violence of the online discursive environment.

4. Empirical research in the digital space

My research aimed to investigate how social media facilitates or exacerbates cultural violence in northern Nigeria. I gained sources and contacts for interviews through a three-month internship I conducted at ZAM Magazine in Amsterdam. I initially planned to conduct both qualitative and quantitative research, combining the use of academic and newspaper articles, netnography and interviews and surveys. However, the netnography I conducted took my research in an unexpected direction, revealing an online culture that in the public domain is predominantly anti-Fulani. This does not suggest that Fulani people are the most victimised ethnic group in northern Nigeria, but rather reflects the common discourse online.

I had anticipated finding hate or “extreme” speech directed at a variety of groups and then planned to use interviews and surveys to analyse and understand how this perpetrated violence. But I was unable to find access to the private chat rooms and channels used by jihadists or bandits to communicate and incite violence, and so I decided to focus instead on the most dominant rhetoric in public social media domains; anti-Fulani sentiment which comes from a variety of ethnic groups. The interviews I conducted provided context for the online ethnography, or netnography that I conducted, where I critically analysed hashtags and buzzwords that were frequently used online to participate in dominant discourses. Each social media platform I was analysing presented new discourses to engage with and introduced new angles to my research. I focused on Twitter because it provided opportunities for analysis less encumbered by algorithms and was easier to follow conversations and dialogue because of hashtags, where Facebook was difficult to analyse without creating a fake profile. I also decided that conducting a survey in addition to this was not necessary and would limit how much space I had to engage with the discourses presented on social media.

Information/data:
I drew the theory and contextual content for my thesis from the literature on social media in the conflict in neighbouring regions as well as the use of social media during revolutions and

conflicts in other developing countries. I complimented this with newspaper articles focusing on my region of interest to ensure all the information and theory used is relevant and context-appropriate. I used interviews and academic articles that discussed how insurgency groups use social media to analyse how the different platforms are used, including whether the most activity happens in public online spheres like Facebook or Twitter, or whether more information is spread through cheaper social platforms, like group chats or chain messages on WhatsApp. The interviews I conducted and the research I did for articles at ZAM Magazine revealed that independent news organisations are also frequently a source of propaganda and push an agenda for or against herders, farmers, or different ethnic groups. Many of these articles are shared on social media, and so I could follow conversations in response to these articles on Twitter too.

Despite the use of a Tor browser to conduct internet research via the "dark web", my research findings are still influenced heavily by the algorithms that manufacture the information that I will receive first. Tor is one of the most commonly used browsers to access the internet with anonymity (NPR, 2014). "Tor" stands for The Onion Router, which references the many layers on this browser that allow users to operate with anonymity. It works in the same way as any internet browser, but by connecting to the internet using Tor, one's computer goes through many other computers and bounces around (NPR, 2014). This means that the location one seems to be in will change. I hoped this would prevent interference from algorithms when using the search tools recommended by Bellingcat and when searching for communications from terrorist groups. However, many of these communications happen less frequently online as groups can communicate with a large network over securely encrypted applications like Telegram (NPR, 2014).

Telegram

Telegram is reportedly an increasingly popular platform for Boko Haram because it is securely encrypted (Slutzker, 2018). There is existing data on how extremist groups have used platforms like Telegram to spread information and mobilise supporters. This network requires an entry point into group chats to be able to view messages. I wanted to gain access to groups on Telegram through contacts at my internship organisation or through search engine tools that allow you to narrow down the search using keywords but could not access the channels without an invitation (Slutzker, 2018). I was able to find some articles and interviews with NGOs who illuminated how Telegram is used, which was valuable for my research because I could conduct analyses on them to understand the cultural violence perpetuated through them and understand whether participants are driven by economic grievances or religious beliefs (Slutzker, 2018).

Twitter

Spaiser et al wrote in 2018 that Data from Twitter was not often used for discourse analysis, even though the platform offers insight and a wealth of information about current political discourses (Spaiser, 2018: 7). They noted that there was a lack of analysis of Twitter data aside from word counts or binary analyses of sentiment with few exceptions. I have manually analysed the semantics of individual Tweets to understand how different groups in Nigeria interact online to understand the social impact of these discourses and whether or how they encourage violence. I chose this approach rather than using software for analysis because that method has been criticised for failing to consider the intricate contexts and backgrounds of this activity, including the use of irony, sarcasm or cultural symbols (Spaiser, 2018: 7). My approach combines the use of academic and newspaper articles, as well as interviews and content from other social media platforms.

I conducted netnography, or online ethnography, on the activity of users whose posts receive significant engagement across Nigeria, with a focus on the north, to observe if and how they engage with social media. I wanted to conduct discourse analyses of their social media content to assess how they perpetuate cultural violence. I found that Twitter was the best platform to be able to access “elites” without needing permission or special access and allowed me to observe how they interacted with other users through hashtags. According to Zeitoff (2017: 1971), this is one of the benefits of social media, in that one can transcend barriers of space, time and in this case, rank, to be able to access direct communication from high-ranking officials.

I had initially planned to analyse this information through the use of a developer account on Twitter but found that going through it manually and using other tools for Twitter analysis was more effective. These tools included Tweetdeck, which is accessible for anyone with a Twitter account. It allows the user to use keyword searches and filter Tweets. By creating a search column, the user can filter out Tweets to focus only on posts that amassed a large following, included a keyword or came from a specific region (Godart, 2019). However, geolocations are often inaccurate, so I filtered Tweets based on how much attention they received. Using Tweetdeck, I created a filter to show Tweets containing these words that received more than 500 reTweets and then analysed some of the most hateful Tweets that garnered the most attention. These words were chosen because they appear most frequently after coding my data, and they are fairly unique to Nigeria, which allows more location accuracy than relying on an actual location filter. I also used the extension, Treeverse, to trace where Tweets that had been reposted multiple times originated from and how many times they were circulated (Godart, 2019).

Facebook

Facebook was one of the platforms where I felt most limited by my algorithms. Although the use of search tools provided by the Global Investigative Journalism Network provided more opportunities to break through these barriers and access content from a wider variety of people and groups, I could still not easily join these groups and found that privacy restrictions prevented me from obtaining enough data to conduct a thorough analysis. To analyse this kind of platform would require a larger network of sources that I would only be able to access over a longer time period or through being in the country.

WhatsApp

My preliminary research revealed that WhatsApp is often used as a tool for forwarding chain messages containing misinformation that pushes a clear agenda. Through the interviews, I conducted, was able to gain access to some of these WhatsApp messages which are often multiple paragraphs long and contain pictures or images to enhance the propaganda within the messages. I conducted discourse analyses of these messages to understand how they perpetuate cultural violence.

Interviews

I conducted interviews with three journalists in Nigeria to help illuminate the context and provide insight beyond what is represented within mainstream media. A common sentiment throughout the interviews was the issue of fake news. Trust in news houses is extremely low, and many people turn to social media for answers instead. The interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviewees also connected me with other journalists who forwarded me the WhatsApp chain messages that perpetuated cultural violence.

Limitations:

I do not speak all the local languages of the regions I am researching, and I had concerns about not being able to engage with all the data in the language it was written in, or, that I might exclude research participants who cannot speak English and have not been active on social media in English. However, by focusing on Nigeria, as opposed to other Sahelian regions, this was less of an issue. Furthermore, many of the conversations I could access were in English, as this is the language frequently used for social media posting in Nigeria, and so I did not require a translator at any point.

A second limitation was that I was not in the region. Although I was in contact with nationals of the region both inside and outside of it, this does increase the chances of producing biased research that is out of touch with prosaic realities within the regions I am focusing on. However, I tried to overcome this challenge with the interviews I conducted with journalists in Nigeria. Although my research findings consisted predominantly of what I found online, these interviews provided the necessary background and understanding of the socio-political context of the region as well as of the news media landscape. Not being in the region also made it more difficult to access private channels for communication within terrorist groups like Boko Haram, and so I had to rely on existing literature and guidance from my interviewees. The next step for expanding this research would be to spend time in the region, develop a network of contacts and be able to gather findings from a wider variety of social media platforms.

Observing and analysing online discourses on Twitter or chain messages on WhatsApp presented predominantly anti-Fulani rhetoric. Social media has provided a platform for violent discourses, including ethnic labelling, that can be viewed and consumed more quickly and by a larger audience than ever before. The use of social media to promote incendiary rhetoric is starkly present in Nigeria and capitalises on complex, historically rooted ethnic tension.

5. Sketching the terrain: Historical context and current climate

The history of ethnic tension in northern Nigeria

Nigeria has a complex history of ethnic tension. Identities have been a significant aspect of society since and during the colonial period. In an attempt to divide and conquer, colonisers created or increased the awareness of identities and tensions between groups, introducing "us versus them" mentalities between Northerners and Southerners, Muslims and Christians and ethnicities, including Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo (Adefemi, 2003).

After achieving independence from Britain in 1960, Nigeria's first ten years of independence were strained by corruption, military coups and minimal development. This included a violent civil war from 1967 to 1970 where the eastern Region fought to secede from Nigeria to form a new sovereign state, Biafra. The movement to secede lost and the eastern region remains a part of Nigeria today, but the violence and mass casualties of the war exacerbated already tense relations between different ethnic groups. This war divided the country along racial and ethnic lines and claimed the lives of between 1 to 3 million people (Udogu, 2018: 158).

There is still a large movement within Nigeria fighting for independence for this region.
The issues central to this war plagued Nigeria throughout the 1960s and remain an issue now; a lack of national identity. Nigeria's borders were drawn by the British colonialists in 1914 and failed to consider that people already living there identified themselves primarily as belonging to local communities that existed for thousands of years. Furthermore, British colonialism in the 1950s had created separate regions that determined how power could be accessed nationally (Udogu, 2018: 158). These divides meant that the largest ethnic groups for each region dominated and had the most power in each region, with Hausa and Fulani holding the North, Yoruba in the West and Igbo in the East (International Crisis Group, 2010). The domination of these groups alienated smaller ethnic groups who struggled to access political power, increasing ethnic tensions and further eroding national identity. According to Udogu (2008:159), when Nigeria became independent in 1960, "in many ways, it was a state without a nation".

Despite government efforts to establish a Nigerian identity and promote economic growth, the tendency to consolidate power within the different regions meant these efforts were largely unsuccessful. A major concern for every region was that they would come to be dominated by another ethnicity, with southerners fearing northern domination most, and vice versa. The early 1960s were fraught with corruption, rigged elections and abuses of power, pushing many Nigerians to lose faith in the federal system. These events triggered years of political turbulence.

According to Uzodike and Whetho, (2011: 217), following the reintroduction of democracy in Nigeria in 1999, ethnic identities and the exploiting of tensions between ethnicities has been a major contributor to socio-political instability. Between 1999 and 2013, communal violence has resulted in the deaths of over 11000 Nigerians. Ethnic violence exists throughout Nigeria but is especially prominent in the Nigeria Delta, the middle-belt, and the predominantly Muslim North and Northwest (Uzodike and Whetho, 2011: 217).

The current state of the farmer-herder conflict

Although the Boko Haram insurgency is the most frequently reported security threat, the farmer-herder conflict is regarded as the most pressing security issue in Nigeria, causing significantly more casualties than Boko Haram and displacing hundreds of thousands of people (Cochran, 2020: 9). The government's response has received wide criticism, with many citizens taking to social media to voice their claims that the government has not done enough to improve security in the region (International Crisis Group, 2021).

The violence began as once-off reactions to incitements but has now escalated to far more violent planned attacks, increasing ethnic, religious, and regional tensions. These attacks happen most frequently in Adamawa, Benue, Nasarawa, Plateau, and Taraba states (International Crisis Group, 2021). The relationship between farmers and herders has grown increasingly tense in the past three decades amid disputes over land, crop damage, cattle stealing, and violence (Vanger and Nwosu, 2020: 20).

The conflict, predominantly between farming communities in central and southern regions and nomadic herders from northern Nigeria, was initially a result of desertification and drought in the Sahel region in the north that prompted the mass migration of herder's southwards to look for water and grasslands. Instability in the northeast caused by Boko Haram and organized crime committed by civilians in the rural northwest and central regions has also forced herders to move southwards (Vanger and Nwosu, 2020: 20). This intrusion to the grazing land in the Middle Belt has also been exacerbated by the presence of militias and the introduction of recent laws that ban open grazing in Benue and Taraba states. The conflict has spread southward in recent years, posing a significant threat to the country's stability. The government response has been lacking, with slow response times, impunity for perpetrators of violence and a lack of policies to curb the tension (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Some scholars would argue that, as a result of the failures of the Nigerian military to protect its citizens, the conflict exists along religious or ethnic lines and has been politicised by members of government who have exacerbated tensions by blaming opposition parties (Cochran, 2020: 11). These claims are refuted by the Nigerian military, who believe international organisations newspapers are aiming to destabilize the region (International Crisis Group, 2021). In the southern states, the conflict is exacerbating the tensions between religious and ethnic groups, with growing animosity between the south's predominantly Christian population and the arrival of mostly Muslim herders. The herders are predominantly Fulani, worsening already fragile ethnic relations (Cochran, 2020: 11).

The disputes are often a result of conflicts over land and water usage as well as interferences of migration routes, stealing livestock, and damaging crops (Cochran, 2020: 11). However, the origins of these tensions date back further but are repeatedly reignited by a variety of factors. The rapid increase in human settlements, public infrastructure, and the presence of large-scale and commercial farmers have also reduced the availability of grazing reserves that were originally secured by the post-independence government (International Crisis Group 2020). The subsequent influx of herders to the Savannah and central and south Nigeria in addition to a rapidly growing population means that there is a higher demand for farmland, which has increased tensions and caused more crop damage and cattle theft. The lack of government intervention even at a local level means that these disagreements quickly become violent (Vanger and Nwosu, 2020: 20). These tensions are broadcast on a variety of social media platforms, especially Twitter and Facebook. Many of these posts and the conversations that follow in the comments sections include hate speech, misinformation and inflammatory language that significantly exacerbates tensions and may encourage civilians to initiate or participate in vigilantism to protect their land or families and compensate for what they see as the failings of the government.

Boko Haram

The deteriorating economic situation, worsened by desertification, ongoing droughts, and cattle plagues has increased poverty, inequality, and subsequently ethnoreligious conflicts because it undermines tolerance, solidarity and strengthens social divisions, violence and radicalism. These economic grievances, and religious and ethnic tensions, have been exploited by a variety of actors, including government officials, opposition parties, militias, and especially insurgent groups to manipulate tensions and incite violence. This provides conditions for terrorist groups to thrive.

Boko Haram has launched ongoing military operations since 2009 with the aim of establishing an Islamic State, creating a dire humanitarian crisis in northern Nigeria (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279). But despite the efforts of the Nigerian military, Boko Haram and the Islamic State's West Africa Province (ISWAP) continue to devastate the region, with the Institute for Economics & Peace (2020) ranking Nigeria as the third-worst country for terrorism according to the Global Terrorism Index.

The group emerged in the early 2000s with Mohammed Yusuf’s new ‘ultra-Salafi’ radicalism which featured different, more extreme views on several religious, social and political points than most of the Salafi's in Nigeria (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279). The Salafi movement is a branch within Sunni Islam that promotes a return to an older, unadulterated form of Islam. With the exception of a few clashes with local police and communities, Boko Haram initially focused on radicalisation and galvanising of support at lower levels, and only escalated to the second more violent phase in 2009 (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279). The beginning of this phase was marked by violent confrontations between Mohammed Yusuf and the Nigerian military forces that went on for a week, with over a thousand casualties and damage to property exceeding N1.5 billion.

After the uprising, the Nigerian military arrested Yusuf at his parents' house and handed him over to the Nigerian police, who publicly executed him outside the Maiduguri police headquarters. The police claimed that he had been shot while fleeing or sustained fatal injuries during the fighting, however, footage revealed his hands were handcuffed when he died, suggesting he was executed. This footage, alongside footage of other civilians being shot after being accused of being members of Boko Haram without proof, sparked distrust in the Nigerian military.

Nigerian President Muhammed Buhari has frequently claimed that Boko Haram has been defeated in the region, but a rise in violence by the armed group in 2020 and 2021 contradicts these claims (AFP News, 2020). On 28 November 2020, an attack by Boko Haram claimed the lives of 110 rice farmers near Maiduguri, the capital of Borno state in northern Nigeria. According to *AFP News* (2020), the farmers were attacked for passing information about Boko Haram to the military. The United Nations described this as the most violent attack on civilians in 2020. This attack was carefully coordinated so that the farmers were killed in a manner that would not draw attention, raising questions about the Nigerian government's competency to deal with the group. Since the start of the insurgency in 2011, over 36000 Nigerians have been killed and over 2,5 million have been displaced (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279).

Boko Haram has been using a variety of tactics, including bombs, raids, and kidnappings, in attempts to gain control of northeast Nigeria and impose strict Islamic law (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279). They have executed these attacks despite ongoing efforts by Nigerian armed forces to defeat the insurgent group. This speaks to a larger issue in the fight against insurgency groups; the military is not equipped to fight against Boko Haram. The strategies they use and the skills they are taught are based on old teachings from colonial-era wars and not adapted to the guerrilla-style tactics of Boko Haram fighters. Boko Haram has maintained an agile and well-adapted strategy that is more appropriate for the environment (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279). Some elements of the Nigerian government appear to be more interested in seeing the conflict continue and profiting off its war economy (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279).

Civilian Joint Task Force

Although vigilante groups usually form to combat criminality or lack of government action, vigilante groups in Nigeria have been established as a response to the governments' counterinsurgency campaign (Agbiboa, 2020A: 362). In Maiduguri, the Civilian Joint Task Force (CJTF) emerged in 2013 in response to both Boko Haram, and the Nigerian military, whose indiscriminate use of violence made them arguably as much of a threat as insurgency groups. The CJTF began with the main goal of rooting out insurgents hiding within neighbourhoods (Agbiboa, 2020A: 362). The CJTF is pro-government and works alongside the military to gain intelligence and take up small combat roles against Boko Haram, and the Nigerian military where necessary. Before the CJTF was established, government soldiers did not differentiate between civilians and insurgents, and operated with limited intelligence and would accuse entire communities of being part of or sympathetic to Boko Haram (Agbiboa, 2020A: 362).

In 2011, when the violence of the insurgency escalated, the Nigerian government sent a Joint Task Force (JTF) to the centre of the violence, Borno State. But due to limited intelligence and poorly adapted military techniques, the JTF struggled to build local networks for gaining intelligence, which is essential to defeating an enemy from within (van Nieuwkerk, 2020: 250). The JTF would identify 'suspect communities' rather than individual suspects, alienating the communities and limiting any chances for future cooperation. According to Abdul Raufu Mustapha, the tendency for some in the military was to shoot first and ask questions later' (Agbiboa, 2020: 362).

The government has become slightly more effective in dealing with the insurgency in recent years under President Buhari, whose 2015 election campaign won based on promises of prioritising defeating Boko Haram, however many Nigerians have been vocal on social media about how they feel the government has still not done enough to quell the violence (International Crisis Group, 2021).

Consequences of the violence

The increase in the severity of the violence and its geographical reach has had dire humanitarian and economic consequences. Although records of the deaths caused by this conflict are not available, the International Crisis Group (2020) reported that between 2011 and 2016 over 2000 people died each year as a result of the violence. The death toll of ethnic violence is higher than that of Boko Haram. The conflict has also caused tens of thousands of people to be displaced, with detrimental consequences to the economy (Cochran, 2020: 10).

As the violence increases, the need for government intervention on both local and national levels grows more urgent. According to Iruoma (2019), state officials implemented a law banning grazing to prevent the conflicts that result from herders moving onto any open land and support farmers who are already struggling because of the droughts. But this law has been criticized for taking away pastoralist traditional practices and forcing herders to either stay in Benue and herd illegally, move to states where the practice is still legal and increase tensions with farmers there, or let their livestock die. Critics have also noted that this law was enforced too quickly and should rather be implemented over a longer period alongside programmes that turn herders into ranchers (International Crisis Group, 2021).

These tensions over land have also given rise to militia and vigilante groups. Although these groups are not a new feature of the Middle Belt, they have grown increasingly more violent over the last decade, consisting predominantly of farming communities, to keep Fulani herders off their land (International Crisis Group, 2021). These groups have cooperated with government forces but have also been notoriously unpredictable, attacking herders they believed to have damaged their farms (Iruoma, 2019).

Entire communities in the north are also frequently punished by civilian militia groups and the Nigerian military because of assumptions of ties to Boko Haram or bandits (International Crisis Group, 2021). In an investigation conducted by *Amnesty International*, it was found that the Civilian Joint Task Force (JTF), established to work alongside security forces to find and arrest members of Boko Haram, had been integral in the mass arrests and screening processes, where informants identify people with suspected ties to Boko Haram (International Crisis Group, 2021). The Civilian JTF was also involved in torturing and killing these men without proof of guilt. These extrajudicial killings are a result of lack of intelligence about the conflict, lack of regulations and ethnic labelling, where people who are Muslim or Fulani, or even just live in a certain area, are assumed to have ties to Boko Haram (Nieuwkerk, 2019: 54).

Reports of human rights abuses by the Nigerian army in Baga have also cast doubt on their competence. Human Rights Watch reported that Nigerian soldiers raided a village where a Boko Haram fighter who had killed one of their men was from (The Guardian, 2015). They burnt down 2000 homes and killed 183 people. Incidents of extrajudicial killings and the reputation of the Nigerian forces in many towns means that some Nigerians feel safer living with insurgent groups than under military control (International Crisis Group, 2021).

In Borno, Yobe and Adamawa states in north-eastern Nigeria, where terror groups have a stronghold, civilians have been targeted by terrorists as well as the military, with reports emerging of the military treating locals with as much violence as Boko Haram because of accusations of local communities harbouring insurgents (Agbiboa, 2020: 361). This constant threat of violence pushes terror-stricken communities to take action and create their own security, whether through the state or through relationships with opposition groups (Agbiboa, 2020: 361).

In a region already rife with violence, the suffering has been exacerbated by the unlawful detention of tens of thousands of people by the Nigerian military and police force because of accusations of ties to insurgency groups (Akinwotu, 2020). *Human Rights Watch* reported that thousands of children were arrested on suspicion of having ties to Boko Haram, including children only five years of age (Akinwotu, 2019). Many were held for years in dire conditions in overcrowded cells (Akinwotu, 2019). In 2019, thousands of people displaced by the violence were forced to return to unsafe regions to provide a barrier against Boko Haram (Akinwotu,, 2019). Data gathered by the UN revealed that between 2013 and 2019, over 3,600 children were kept in detention centres by the Nigerian authorities, but *Human Rights Watch* noted that the Nigerian government did not allow the UN to enter the detention centres to verify the statistics (Akinwotu, 2019). The children reported being beaten by security forces before reaching the barracks (Akinwotu, 2019).

Many of the people who have been detained are displaced civilians or victims fleeing ISWAP or Boko Haram and have been wrongly detained by civilian militia groups or the Nigerian military based on suspicion of ties to the insurgency (International Crisis Group, 2021). According to Amnesty International, civilians have been detained and tortured for years without trial or charge (Akinwotu, 2020). They are not provided with medical treatment, with the report noting “inhumane” living conditions at three of the centres (Akinwotu, 2020). Human rights violations have been reported for years at the Giwa barracks detention centre (Akinwotu, 2020).

These allegations are vehemently denied by the Nigerian army. Some of the centres aim to reintegrate alleged jihadists into society through the “safe corridor” programme. Although the conditions were not as poor at these locations, abuses were still widespread according to the report (Akinwotu, 2019). Amnesty International reported in 2015 that at least 7000 people died in detention centres in north-east Nigeria (Akinwotu, 2019).

The Nigerian government introduced Operation Safe Corridor in 2016 with the aim of taking in voluntary defectors from insurgency groups for deradicalization. The programme is supposed to be voluntary, however many of the people who have been in the programme say they were brought there against their will. The programme receives many civilians who are escaping Boko Haram controlled areas and labels them as jihadists, which crowds and disrupts the centres and discourages donors (International Crisis Group: 2021). This process is also often turbulent and does not facilitate a smooth transition into society for deradicalized jihadists. The programme has been extremely controversial, visible on social media as Twitter users lambast the government for providing amnesty to insurgents (International Crisis Group: 2021). However, although the programme does allow some insurgents impunity for crimes committed in terrorist organisations, a bigger issue is the detention of civilians based on suspicion and the inhumane living conditions within detention centres before they are sent to the Safe Corridor (International Crisis Group: 2021).

Despite some government efforts to increase national unity, ethnic identity remains a more prioritised identifier than national identity. Pressure on resources, especially land, and a lack of effective government policies to quell the violence has significantly exacerbated ethnic tension (International Crisis Group, 2021). This turbulent socio-political environment has also been exploited by terrorist groups and criminals, all of whom are now able to use social media to spread their messages, which due to increases in accessibility, much of the population is able to access. However, the low digital literacy rates mean that fake news spreads rapidly and is often unquestioned.

Social media use in Nigeria

According to statistics from January 2021, there are around 33 million people in Nigeria active on social media (Varrella, 2021). This is an increase from the 28 million users reported in 2020, which speaks to the rapid growth of internet accessibility in the country. The most frequently and widely used platform is WhatsApp, which has over 90 million active users. The other popular platforms are Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook Messenger and Twitter (Varrella, 2021).

In the statistics taken from the third quarter of 2020, the most recent for this category, 93 percent of people using the internet were WhatsApp users, with 86 percent and 82 percent using Facebook and YouTube respectively (Varrella, 2021). Statistics from 2020 show that 41.4 percent of the population used the internet on a mobile device, which amounts to 85,26 million people. This number is expected to increase to 64,9 percent of the population in 2025 (Varrella, 2021). These statistics do not speak to digital literacy or the ability to evaluate the content one receives.

Dissemination of misinformation in Nigeria

My interviewees spoke at length about the dangers of fake news and the high quantity of it, noting the low digital literacy rates that mean many Nigerians cannot distinguish between accurate and inaccurate information. Theophilus Abbah (2021), a journalist in northern Nigeria, noted that the videos spread on YouTube or Facebook are sometimes aimed to compel a family to pay a ransom to save their child, but are also often videos from years prior where face coverings are used, or the location is inaccurate. This situation is exacerbated by the media landscape, where many news organisations produce biased content that pushes an agenda.

The news media landscape in northern Nigeria

Between 1960 and 1999, the years of military rule in Nigeria, national and regional newspapers were vehemently discouraged from writing negatively about any of the leaders and were required to discuss them with a reverence for the “dignity” of the dictator of the time, resulting in a news media landscape dominated by neo-patrilineal systems or brown envelope journalism, where politicians fund journalists to write positively about them (White, 2017: 17). However, many journalists did not subscribe to this mandate and continued to expose incidents of imprisonment without trial, corruption and the exploitation of public office positions, despite the threat of torture or imprisonment. By continually exposing human rights violations and oppression, journalists contributed to the eventual return of democratic elections in 1999 (White, 2017:17).

In 2021, Nigeria has a vibrant media landscape, with more than 100 independent newspapers. However, stories related to politics, corruption, terrorism or ethnic tension often see the journalist responsible become a target of a wide range of groups, including government officials, or involve brown envelope journalism (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). While there is still good journalism in Nigeria, this brown envelope journalism remains a feature of its news media landscape, with large networks of members of the presidential circle and leaders of key institutions maintaining close relationships with media owners and editors (White, 2017:18). This means that much of the media still works for the benefit of those in power and those in their network. According to Reporters Without Borders (2020), Nigeria is currently one of the most dangerous countries in West Africa for journalists to work in, with journalists becoming victims of spying, random attacks, arrests, or murder. The street protests in 2020 saw an increase in violence against the media, as reporters were attacked and news organisations set alight (Reporters Without Borders, 2021).

During the elections in 2019, the spread of disinformation was unprecedented and circulated both on news sites and social media (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). The misinformation that spreads even from official news sites also exacerbates the spread of fake news on social media. When official news sites are silent on issues, especially pertaining to government figures who have a hold over media groups, social media users seem to try to fill this vacuum (White, 2017:18).

Leading up to the general elections in 2019, the spread of fake news was at an all-time high, with many candidates willing to spread any misinformation to exploit existing tensions and fears and increase support (Jones, 2019). There were numerous social media posts featuring doctored photos of politicians, including a picture that had been photoshopped to suggest incumbent president Muhammed Buhari had stones thrown at him in Kano by supporters of an opposition candidate. A reverse search reveals the photo was used first in the Ugandan elections of 2016 (Jones, 2019). The speed and dexterity with which these stories spread, and the traction they gained on social media, speaks to the lack of fact-checking or filtering done by the average user

(Jones, 2019). Through portraying and sending subjective messages on social media networks, a variety of figures are able to indoctrinate their audiences and mobilise support for their causes, often playing on religious or ethnic stereotypes, for example, that all herders or Fulani people are members of Boko Haram and exploiting anti-government rhetoric and political instability (Nieuwkerk, 2019: 251).

Social media has become an increasingly important tool for people to receive and consume information. Literature on Boko Haram notes that radicalisation and mobilisation messages are exchanged more privately. However, there was constant discussion about Boko Haram that spoke to perceptions of terrorism, and the government's response to terrorism.

6. Cultural violence and anti-Fulani sentiment in social media use in Nigeria

Boko Haram's use of social media

Despite terrorism being a common discourse on social media, the exchanges between Boko Haram members and the radicalization process happen in less public spheres. Social media has a pronounced effect on political violence and has been studied with regards to its role in radicalisation and recruitment to Salafi-jihadist groups and far-right extremist groups. According to Zeitoff (2017: 1979), many have argued that through the internet, content from radical and extremist groups is far more accessible. Where in the past, someone may have had to travel to a dangerous area or subscribe to some obscure newsletter, individuals can now access that content more anonymously from within their homes (Zeitoff, 2017: 1979). Through the internet, these individuals can also find people who share their views more easily and create solidarity. People can also curate their own filter bubbles, by choosing the kind of information they find by returning to similar sources, which some have argued is significantly exacerbating polarisation (Zeitoff, 2017: 1979).

Boko Haram began by using more traditional media forms, including propaganda videos aimed at recruiting new fighters and sharing information about their activities for a local and international audience (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279). In 2011, Abul Qaqa was the groups' main spokesman and spoke to the press at least 53 times. But from 2014, they began using social media more aggressively (Slutzker, 2018).

Social media has grown more and more important to Boko Haram since 2013. Social media allows insurgency groups to communicate directly with their audience, rather than relying on a representative to reach the mainstream media (Nieuwkerk, 2019: 54). They used Facebook initially because it was a widely used platform in northern Nigeria and could facilitate the spreading of the messages to Telegram, which is more securely encrypted (Slutzker, 2018). By beginning with a more general message on a more public platform, they are able to then move the conversation to a more private and protected channel like Telegram, where their content cannot be flagged and removed as easily as on Twitter or Facebook (Nieuwkerk, 2019: 54). This has allowed them to grow consistently since 2013. The violence used by both state security forces and Boko Haram, and the civilians caught in the conflict has alienated the population (Umar and Ehrhardt, 2020: 279).

This is visible in the discourses on social media, which reflect anti-government rhetoric, which often includes anti-Fulani rhetoric, with many users stating that they do not feel the government has done enough to protect them. By looking for the phrase Boko Haram and placing a filter to only receive the most engaged with Tweets, this was one of the first examples I found. Here, the user claims that the government not only does not protect the nation against terrorism but is also sponsoring terrorist groups. the Tweet reads,

> *"If you didn't learn from the #EndSARS protests, I hope you can learn from today that EVERY act of insecurity in this nation is sponsored by the government. Every single one. From Boko Haram to terror bandits to kidnappers to armed robbers, they're all sponsored by the government."*

The Tweet was shared 2,400 times.

In the Tweet below, the user rebukes the government for not taking decisive action against Fulani people, and for providing immunity to Fulani herdsmen. The Tweet reads,

> *"Has the government given immunity to Fulani herdsmen in this country ?*
> *They are killing the indigenous occupants of Benue state and nothing is still being done.*
> *This is pure Genocide 🤦‍♂️ "*

There were numerous other Tweets revealing the same rhetoric. Although the rhetoric from military leaders, and even president Buhari, often proclaims victory over Boko Haram, the behaviour of military officials threatens to destabilize the security operations. Al Jazeera (2015) reported that dozens of government soldiers had faced court-martials for disobeying orders, with some even given death sentences. Some soldiers also claimed that higher-level military officials were benefitting from the money intended for war efforts, leaving the soldiers poorly equipped to fight the war (Megaloudi, 2015).

Prominent discourses on Twitter

Twitter emerged as a major platform for political discourse in Nigeria in 2020 during the #EndSars protests. Cyberactivism from both within the country and internationally created new accountability for the Nigerian government and led to individuals learning how to take action beyond social media. However, my findings reveal the other "dark" side of Twitter, where a platform for extreme speech is provided that enables a range of discourses and allows the perpetuation of ethnic labels (Benesch and Maynard, 2016: 76). The activity on Twitter surrounding the ethnic tension does not only come from a few accounts of politically important people but rather is a constant conversation that can be tracked through hashtags and responses to news stories.

My findings on Twitter, through following the activity of certain hashtags, presented strong sentiments anti-government, anti-Fulani, anti-herder and pro-Biafra. Pro-Fulani voices seem largely to be absent from discourses on Twitter, and when more moderate sentiment was shared regarding Fulani people, it was met with disparagement. This reveals how the format that a message is portrayed in may shape its perception (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967).

Threads that lambasted one, or both Fulani people and herder people, were often sparked by news stories or posts about violence in the northern regions of Nigeria, as well as some areas in the middle belt, where herders have migrated to in the wake of desertification in the regions they previously inhabited in the north. Most politicians, including state senators in the north and middle belt, did not post inflammatory or directly incendiary Tweets in the time period I was studying them, January 2021 until June 2021. However, comments they made decrying the violence against ethnic groups often led to violent sentiments being exchanged in the comments section of the posts.

Many of these conversations took part as threads beneath posts from international, national or state newspapers or blogs. The articles often contained hateful language and pushed a clear violent agenda, but also triggered a response with similar anti-Fulani sentiments when shared on Twitter. These articles revealed the power of such widespread access to the internet. Where people would previously rely on mainstream media houses to receive information about current events, this information is now available on a variety of platforms because any individual with internet access can start a blog and call it news (Zeitoff, 2018: 1979). This information can remain online regardless of its legitimacy or accuracy, and in places where digital literacy is low, like Nigeria, this information may be consumed without question (Slutzker, 2018). This is visible through the comments on news blogs shared to Twitter where the content goes unchecked and unquestioned, which I will provide examples of below.

I used software to search the words that appeared most commonly in hateful rhetoric, I isolated these words after I had coded my data, and then created a filter that reveals the Tweets with these words that received the most engagement, to understand how widespread this sentiment is. I also searched the accounts publishing the Tweets and commenting on them, and unlike many perpetrators of hate speech online, they are not operating with false accounts without having any followers or previous online activity, but rather these hateful and violent Tweets come from active users who might promote music or sport in one Tweet and suggest all Fulani herders are murderers in the next. This reiterates how much of the violence and prejudices have become normalised discourses (Hall, 1997).

The anti-Fulani sentiment comes from a range of people. After I applied the filter to the search that would display only Tweets that received 500 or more retweets, the most common accounts posting hate speech against Fulani people identified as members of the Biafran independence movements in their bios or in other Tweets. One of the accounts most frequently using the words

"Fulani" or "Fula" was Nnamdi Kanu, leader of IPOB. His Tweets feature sentiments about the concept of Nigeria as one united country being over, with heavy criticism of the government and what he perceives as their inaction in defeating insurgent groups and combating banditry. He attributes this inaction to their loyalties to the Fulani people. Social media has been instrumental for the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), especially as Buhari's regime has continued to crack down on their movement. IPOB's main aim is to restore or create the independent Biafra state in the southeast of Nigeria with an independence referendum. IPOB was established in 2012 by British- Nigerian activist Nnamdi Kanu. Kanu created a Twitter account in October 2018 and has since amassed a following of 320 000. This platform is primarily used to raise awareness about the independence movement, but in the process of making his dissatisfaction with the government clear, he demonises Fulani people and herders.

The phrase "all Fulani terrorists" or "Fulani herder murderers" is often used in Tweets that blame any criminality on Fulani people, usually without proof. In these Tweets, he is not usually referring to the incidents where Fulani extremists have been found guilty, but rather places blame for any incidence of criminality or terrorism on Fulani people. The conversations that follow from these kinds of Tweets reveal how the reproduction of these prejudices for so long has made them function as regimes of truth, and in some cases made violence against Fulani people seem normal (Hall, 1997). The association of Muslims as terrorist or herders as violent and dishonest has been repeated and gone uncontested so many times, it seems to function as an absolute in these online environments.

The Twitter activity of the leader of the group, Kanu, reflects a patriotism for Biafra and promotes a clear anti-Fulani stance. In the Tweet below, he accuses Fulani people of being synonymous with Boko Haram and ISWAP.

> *"ISWAP/BH #Fulani boys chilling in public, in broad daylight with AK47, educating fellow #Fulani men on their pathway to the Atlantic Ocean. No army, no police. No air strikes, no shoot at sight. No*

@CatrionaLaing1

Meanwhile, in Biafraland, young men are being shot at sight."

In response to a news report that alleges herdsmen will avenge their murdered colleagues, Kanu Tweeted that IPOB would go "blood for blood" in retaliation. In a separate Tweet, shown below, he discusses how Fulani "terrorists" are not properly dealt with because President Buhari is "neo-colonial" and "Fulanised". He references Miyetti Allah, the Cattle Breeders Association of Nigeria, also known as MACBAN. This is an umbrella organisation for cattle breeders in Nigeria. According to the Tweet,

"If Miyetti Allah terror herdsmen & other murderous #Fulani groups, including Boko Haram insurgents can be arrested, freed and rehabilitated by this neo-colonial Fulanised @NGRPresident, then no single soul deserves to be in any prison in Nigeria.

If you know you know! #UGM"

Nigerian politician Femi Fani-Kayode also posted many Tweets with strong anti-Fulani sentiment. One Tweet made in March 2021 alleges that a Boko Haram commander married the daughter of a Fulani herdsman. He said, "What a Combination!" The Tweet is accompanied by a video, which a reverse image search revealed is from 2016. The Tweet sparked numerous comments where all Fulani people were likened to "terrorists". A few comments noted that the video was from 2016 and provided a link to that post on Facebook. The comment section of that original post reflected a similar violent anti-Fulani rhetoric, which calls Fulani people "animals" and suggests they obtained the weapons illegally or through government ties.

Many of these discourses label Fulani people as evil and suggest or advise that they be dealt with harshly by the government, either with long jail terms or death. The discourses often suggest that the government is not doing enough to curb the violence because President Buhari is sympathetic to herders and Muslims. There are other, more moderate discourses that appear in the threads too, however, they often receive less attention. This Tweet calls out the ethnic labelling and received a substantial response. The author has 101 000 followers. These Tweets were in the minority.

“Buhari's blatant nepotism and incompetence is not just creating ethnic tension in the country, it has singled out his Fulani ethnic group as villains.

The Fulanis in Nigeria never felt hated or vilified by other ethnic groups until Buhari's APC came along. That man is a cancer”

The word “herders” also features threads of hateful comments about Fulani people, as most herders are Fulani. Most of the Tweets with the word “herder” accused all herders and Fulani people of stealing land and murdering farmers. Many of the Tweets, like the one below, described the violence not as farmer-herder conflict but as genocide of farmers and Christians by herders.

“Over 150 people have been killed in Benue in the last 7 days by Armed Fulani Herdsmen.

There is a systematic genocide going on in the middle belt of Nigeria and it is largely under reported.

#BenueUnderAttack
#Genocide”

The above Tweet comes from a verified local news agency. While reports from other news agencies and international organisations, including the Global Terrorism Index, have confirmed that extremist Fulani people have been responsible for many of the fatalities in the north of the country, the term, "genocide" connotes large scale killing with the intention of destroying an entire ethnic group (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020). There is no proof that this is the agenda of Fulani people, but this kind of fearmongering or extreme speech serves to encourage this discursive warfare online (Benesch and Maynard, 2016: 76).

In the Tweet below, the user hints at the loyalties of the president and suggests that the government does not do enough to minimise the violence caused by the "bloodthirsty murderous Fulani Herdsmen".

> *"When are you going to show urgency and deal with these bloodthirsty murderous Fulani Herdsmen the way you rushed to ban Twitter @MBuhari?"*

The idea that the government, especially President Buhari, is sympathetic to Boko Haram or Fulani people is a common characteristic of these Tweets. Users posit that the Nigerian security forces are not used to intervene in violence perpetrated by Fulani people. Many echo the sentiment of the Tweet below, which was shared 1500 times.

"You won't see the Nigerian Army, Police, DSS & the Presidency trying to stop the Massacre happening in Southern Kaduna by killer Fulani Herdsmen. The Presidency has continuously turned a blind eye to this Onslaught by killer Fulani Herdsmen. Enough is Enough #BenueUnderAttack"

Many of the Tweets above are accompanied by jarring, manipulative pictures of dead bodies or injured children. However, my interviewees noted that these images are often old or feature face coverings, suggesting the images may not be from the time or place that the Tweet alleges.

The term "bandits" appeared frequently in Tweets and threads; however this word could not be isolated as it is not specific to northern Nigeria. The false syllogism, that all Fulani people are working with Boko Haram, ISWAP and bandit groups is a common sentiment expressed on both WhatsApp and Facebook too. It is this kind of sentiment and fostering of ethnic tensions that leads to dangerous and hateful speech targeting Fulani people, based on the belief that they are guilty of banditry, terrorism or the harbouring of terrorists.

Use of WhatsApp

Although Twitter is often regarded as one of the most salient social media platforms for coverage of political discourses, WhatsApp is an extremely influential platform in many developing countries for planning and spreading information. WhatsApp is also cost-efficient and requires a less stable internet connection than other platforms. However, because it is more difficult to find the source of a message, it does make disseminating misinformation or fake news significantly easier. There is a lack of regulation of this platform too, with WhatsApp only recently introducing the function that shows when a message has been forwarded many times.

The WhatsApp messages that circulate often contain extremely volatile and hateful language and aim to manipulate the reader and incite hate against the Fulani people and herders by making sweeping generalisations and accusations of associations with or participation in banditry and kidnapping. The Biafra independence movement makes frequent use of WhatsApp too. One of the chain messages forwarded to me through a journalist in Nigeria calls for all supporters of the Biafra movement to actively campaign for the secession of this region. This message can be found in Addendum A.

A quote from the message reads,

> *"It is time to take our destiny on our hands and bring freedom to ourselves and our children and the generations of Biafrans yet unborn."*

However, unlike some of the other messages or content on Twitter, this did not seem to directly incite violence or encourage people to achieve these ends with force. According to the message,

> *“Nobody can stop us. Nobody can blockade us as they did in the first war. We're not going to fight any war with anybody, we are walking to Freedom. We will not shoot any gun with them. They will prepare their weapon. They will have nobody to kill with their weapon.”*

Discourses on Twitter feature anti-Fulani sentiment but seem to lack Fulani voices or discourse that targets Igbo’s or Christians. The words “farmers” and “Christians” are also not unique to Nigeria and cannot be isolated and followed as easily. However, WhatsApp is allegedly used by Fulani extremists to project their messages. I accessed these messages through journalists in Nigeria. One message, which can be found in Addendum B, claims responsibility for an attack on Samuel Ortom, the governor of Benue State. Ortom has been outspoken against open cattle grazing and what he perceives as inaction by the Nigerian government in combatting banditry, cattle theft and terrorism. This excerpt below describes the stance of the attackers and the reasons for the attack:

> *“Our courageous fighters carried out this historic attack to send a great message to Ortum and his collaborators: Where ever you are, once you are against Fulani long term interest, we shall get you down. This is a clear warning. We hope those who take us for granted will get the indisputable message.*
>
> *Our intention is unequivocal: TO KILL HIM. That mission will one day be fulfilled and very soon too.”*

The rest of the message, which can be found in the addendum, warns that anyone who opposes Fulani interests will suffer at their swords. According to an article by the Nigerian newspaper, *The Premium Times* (2021), Ortum reported that he assumed he was being attacked by a Fulani militia group who claimed they would “eliminate” him on his own land. The article does not reference any other sources, and so determining the legitimacy of the story is difficult.

Because the source of these messages cannot be verified, one cannot assume whether they are a tactic of Fulani extremists or a move to increase anti-Fulani sentiment, but these messages are taken as truth by many, and therefore are relevant to understand how social media is exacerbating tensions between different ethnic groups or farmers and herders. The violence in this message and in the Tweets also speaks to what Zeitoff (2018: 1972) describes as the “weaponization” of social media.

By following these words or hashtags, one’s feed becomes dominated by this violent and incendiary anti-Fulani discourse. This discourse establishes a regime of truth that labels all herders, Muslims and Fulani people as violent murders. While these discourses may not always translate to direct violence, they create cultural violence, the effects of which typically extend over years (Galtung, 1994: 295).

The consequences can be understood through the concept of cultural violence because the results are not visible within a single act of direct violence (Galtung, 1990: 295). But rather, they can be seen through the ethnic labels and beliefs that become embedded in a culture as these discourses are continuously repeated and accepted and begin to make violence more acceptable (De Bruijn, 2020: 2).

7. Conclusion

Violence in Northern Nigeria has been endemic for the previous 30 years, with conflict over land and resources coupled with ethnic tension and the rise of extremist religious groups (Cochran, 2020). This violence has escalated substantially in the last ten years, alongside the increase in access to Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), and more specifically to the increase in ease of operating and following social media platforms. My research aimed to investigate whether social media is facilitating and exacerbating cultural violence online and providing easily accessible platforms to broadcast hate and mobilise civilians to partake in dangerous speech (Benesch and Maynard, 2016). Through analysing Telegram and conducting netnography on Twitter and WhatsApp, I assessed the conversations on these platforms to understand what kind of sentiments they were contributing to and how they encourage discursive warfare.

The findings revealed a weaponization of social media, which is creating a violent discursive environment that is accessible to anyone with internet access (Zeitoff, 2018). The anti-Fulani sentiment was in the overwhelming majority. Rhetoric that categorised all Fulani's as terrorists, murderers or jihadis was common, and often extremely violent. When applying filters to view only the Tweets that had received the most engagement, the threads were all dominated by this sentiment. Any news stories that discussed criminality or terrorism sparked a stream of comments that accused Fulani people of being the perpetrators, having ties to extremist groups and running the country into ruin. Although my research did not focus on the news media landscape, the increase in online newspapers and the shareability to social media means that the two have become related. But as misinformation continues to circulate, social media also fills a vacuum when the information from news houses is disputed or distrusted. The posts and comments came from a variety of sources, including politicians or members of the Biafra independence movement. The posts seemed to be accepted by followers without much question, visible in how they were shared by thousands of users and the comments did not dispute or discourage the violent sentiments expressed in the posts.

One of the biggest contributors to this discourse, whose Tweets received the most attention, is the leader of IPOB, Nnamdi Kanu. In his promotion of the independent Biafra state, he often critiques the government of Nigeria and especially President Buhari for being sympathetic to jihadists and Fulani people. While these critiques of the government are not invalid, the attacks on Fulani people are often based on erroneous information and reflect the violence of online discourses. These messages and anti-Fulani sentiment were also prevalent on Facebook and circulated via WhatsApp chain messages. There have been many cases of violence and criminality committed by extremist Fulani's, however, the ethnic labels and stereotypes perpetuated in online spaces often make sweeping generalisations and enforce cultural violence, by reinforcing stereotypes about that ethnicity and normalising violent speech (Galtung, 1990).

I did not attempt to identify or establish a link between this online rhetoric and direct violence. But these discourses are still important and reveal the cultural violence at play, which manifests itself not in a single event but in ideas that begin to function as absolute within a culture and are reproduced and remain unchanged for generations (Galtung: 1990). Based on the idea that people are influenced by what they read online, and this information is circulating far more quickly than prior to social media platforms, I have argued that anti-Fulani propaganda online has enabled and encouraged discursive warfare. This study focused on the digital sphere, but presents an opportunity for a future study to research and compare how these networks translate in the physical, to understand the results of this discursive warfare offline.

Addendum A

WhatsApp chain message received from source

WhatsApp received on 17 March at 15:24 from Theophilus Abbah

“TRANSCRIPT OF THE MAIDEN ADDRESS OF ALHAJI MUJAHID DOKUBO-ASARI TO BIAFRANS AS THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BIAFRA DEFACTO CUSTOMARY GOVERNMENT IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE ON SATURDAY 13TH MARCH 2021

Fellow Biafrans,

Today marks a great epoch in our history, an history that have been chequered with pains, sweat and our blood. We went through three years of gruesome genocide. We came out of it and became a people that have no direction as to where we belong to.

Are we still Biafrans or we are Nigerians?

Gowon proclaimed 'No, Victor nor vanquished' but yet he created 12 States which before the war Nigeria had four regions----the western region, the midwestern region, the Eastern region and the Northern region and the Lagos special territory.

In the creation of 12 states, we had a preponderance increase in the number of administrative units contributed nothing to the existence of the entity Nigeria, Six States in the North and the three regions of the south had Six States including the Lagos special area.

The resources of the so-called Federation of Nigeria were confiscated and taken over by those who have now become the new masters of Nigeria.

Even though as Biafrans we lost a war, all others also lost the war.The people of the western region lost the war, the people of Lagos lost the war, the people of the midwestern region also lost this war.

There has been uprising in various part of Biafra. The Ogoni revolt that led to the death of Ken Saro Wiwa and others and the not ending Ijaw revolt against the occupation of the Nigerian State and confiscation of our resources. We as a people have resolved that as Biafrans, it is time for us to take our destiny in our hands. It is time to take our destiny on our hands and bring freedom to ourselves and our children and the generations of Biafrans yet unborn.

My comrades, how long will they tell us that they must forcefully enter our land and move their animals? How long will they tell us that the acceptable legal principles of 'Cujus Est Solum Ejus

Usque Ad Coelum' (he who owns the land, owns all that is in the land, above the land or below the land) does not apply in our case? How long will Zamfara have the right to mine our gold and other solid mineral resources and we will not have same right to do so? How long will our creek, stream, water, riverlets belong to the omnibus Nigerian State that we have no right to all these resources, but they belong to the Nigerian state?

How long will Alamesiya be convicted but an Atiku cannot be convicted? How long will a James Ibori be convicted but an Halu and El-Rufai cannot be convicted?
How long will money belonging to the people of Delta State, 6.2 million pounds be taken, confiscated and spent in constructing road from Abuja to Kano,in constructing roads from Lagos to Ibadan?

These are not Uche Mefor's doing, these are not caused by Dokubo-Asari. It does not affect us alone. It affects every one of us.

Fellow Biafrans, let us ask ourselves this question, simple question:
Are you happy with Nigeria? Are you sure that you are satisfied with the life we are living? I am not satisfied with this life that I am living. I cannot play a second fiddle to anybody. I am Mujahid Abuakiri Dokubo-Asari, Alabo Edi Abali of Kalabari. I cannot be anything less.Will you want to be something less than what you are?

A lot of people will after today make an analysis of this speech and come out and talk. Why would Uzor Kalu go to prison when people who are Governors at the same time with him like Kwankwaso are not in prison. They did not steal but we believe that Uzor Kalu stole.This is the inequities of the system in which we find ourselves.

One of the divine books says, "I see, I see, I see slave riding on horseback and Masters walking on foot. This happening described our situation as a people. All over the world Biafrans have projected the image of the black race but in our home, we are nobody.
In our home, we are now third fiddle. We are mere appendages to Nigeria. It is time we cut ourselves loose.This has formed the decision, in accepting this position, this Trust. I never expected it from all our brothers and sisters across the globe who gather together and said, "come and lead".

I hesitated a little but I thank God that it is time for us to do our duty and our service to motherland. I have accepted this role. I have dedicated my life hundred percent to play this role.

I am not your leader.I am not your master. I am one of you.There are many of you out there who are far better than me, who are more entitled to this position that myself, who are more intelligent than me, who are more wiser and have traveled and globe trotted far far more than me that you saw in me some qualities that qualify me to even come near this office. I appreciate you.

But I want to say that in this movement, many of us might not reach the Promised Land. The enemy is ever ready to bear his fangs and claws.But by the grace of God, for every pharaoh God created a Moses, for every Goliath,God created a David.

As we go through this period of uncertainty, this period of upheavals, by the grace of God will come out on top amidst.

My First act today in taking this position is to name those who would be on the driver's seat to navigate through this period of Tempest, this period of uncertainty with me.
I want to call on our brother, George Onyibe to come on board to join as the secretary of the de facto customary government of the state of Biafra.He will take care of the administrative, day-to-day administration of the Biafran State.

I also call on our brother Uche Mefor not to consider this office as too small for him, to come up and accept as the head of information of this new government.He shall be the Secretary of Information and communication.

I also call on our brother Emeka Emeka Esiri to take care of the legal needs of this nascent government.

My brothers and sisters, the four of us will kick start the process.
Others would come on board.We want volunteers who are committed, we want volunteers because there is nothing anywhere. We are the people who have volunteered to salvage ourselves first and salvage the rest of us.

I also call on all Biafrans in the various provinces of the Biafran Nation:
Aba province, Abakaliki province, Anang province, Awka province, calabar province, Degema province, Eket province, Enugu province, Nsukka province, Ogoja province, Oji River province,Okigwe province,Onitsha province, Opobo province, Orlu province,Owerri province, Owerri province,Portharcourt province, Umuahia province, Uyo and Yenogoa.

We're going to proceed to set up provincial structures of government starting with provincial assemblies and provisional governance and administrators.We want volunteers to come out from all the twenty legally created provinces of the Biafran Nation. We proceeded to say that we know that we have brothers outside who itchy and eager to join the train of freedom.Our brothers and sisters in Western Ijaw,our brothers and sisters in Isoko,our brothers and sisters in Anioma and Ndokwa. We call on all of them that we are not going to leave them behind, but we want to do what is legal first and foremost that want you to join us in this struggle for freedom.

Let nobody, let nobody be mistaking that a Biafran will be worse than Nigerian. There is nothing that will be worse than what we are facing today Nigeria. What we are experiencing in Nigeria? What we are going through in Nigeria----nothing.They will tell you Igbos will overrun you, IJaws will kill you.This divide and rule tactics will not work again with us.You have been killing us.It is not Ijaw that is killing us, you have been killing us. It is not Igbos that are killing us. The Ogonis were killed, were they killed by Igbos. Were they killed by Ijaws? The people of Odi that were massacred and wiped out from the face of this earth.Were they killed by Igbos? Were they killed by Ogoni?

These your cheap lies and blackmails will never be accepted.

Fellow Biafrans our government would concentrate on the following areas:

Security, Paramount! Securing the lives and properties of our people.

Two, we're going to invest everything we have in science and technology to increase the scientific and technological discoveries, fabrications and making life easier for people through Science and Technology. We're going to pursue rigorously the education of our people.We're going to make sure that we feed ourselves. You are all aware of the recent plot where they decided to stop food from the north. They failed woefully; they will continue to fail.The government of the Biafran States will look to make sure that we only eat what we can produce.

Nobody can stop us. Nobody can blockade us as they did in the first war.We're not going to fight any war with anybody, we are walking to Freedom. We will not shoot any gun with them. They will prepare their weapon. They will have nobody to kill with their weapon.

The health of our people would be Paramount to us. We'll make sure that we use the best available to us for the health of our people. We're not telling you we are going to build state-of-art hospitals, we're going to build heavens down to earth, but there are ways the health of our people can be taken care of. If you had ever visited Cuba you will know why these medicals...The problem that goes on in the world, the pandemic and so on, Cuba had not been in the news because they have an effective medical system. We're going to put in place cheap, but very effective medical institutions that would take care of the health need of all our people.

Thank you and God bless you.

PREPARED BY UCHE OKAFOR-MEFOR [INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION]”

Addendum B

WhatsApp chain message received from source

Received on 27 March at 22:49 from Theophilus Abbah

“Shared as received

Why we attacked Orton

THE FUNAM STATEMENT

Our attention has been drawn to media reports today speculating about who attacked the Governor of Benue State,Samuel Orton

Yes. Yes We did. The Fulani Nationality Movement, (FUNAM) carried out the attack. We have genuine reasons. We acted on behalf of Millions of Fulani people in 15 countries.

It's a case of veangeance against an infidel who has used his time and money, deployed in destroying the Fulani values and inheritance.

Our courageous fighters carried out this historic attack to send a great message to Ortum and his collaborators: Where ever you are, once you are against Fulani long term interest, we shall get you down. This is a clear warning. We hope those who take us for granted will get the indisputable message.

Our intention is unequivocal: TO KILL HIM. That mission will one day be fulfilled and very soon too.

Eleven of FUNAM operatives were involved in the attack. Ortum excaped today because of a slight technical communication error. Nest time, he will not be lucky. We can assure him and his supporters

Ortom has been leading the campaign against Fulani interests in the North. We have our operatives in all Southern States. Each will face our sword soon

We warn collaborators working against Fulani people across Nigeria: WE SHALL GET YOU irrespective of your hidden place.

We state clearly, any state or individual that opposes RUGA will be confronted. Any State or individial that opposes ranching, we shall get you. Speak against ranching and RUGA even on the internet: Our Noiseless fighters shall find and fix you.

In the next few months, FUNAM will carry out attacks on strategic human and material assets of States and Non State groups or individuals known for their anti-Fulani campaigns.

We shall hunt you down in your houses, in your work places, in your car, in your streets. It's a matter of time

Signed

Umar Amir Shehu
March 20/2021”

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