

# TACKLING MISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS AND HATE SPEECH IN THE SOCIETY

## Policy Brief



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Policy Brief

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Social media has rapidly evolved into an essential instrument for individuals and businesses in today's interconnected world. Nevertheless, the ongoing revolution in communication media and information technologies presents both exciting and daunting challenges. This revolution, often referred to as “new media,” is marked by increased tension and an unprecedented proliferation of fake news and misinformation. Such phenomena have the potential to polarize public opinion, incite violent extremism and hate speech, and ultimately undermine Catholic social teachings and erode trust in democratic processes.

While fake news, misinformation, and hate speech are not novel occurrences, they have gained newfound significance in recent times. Many individuals exploit the accessibility of sophisticated information on social media without verifying its accuracy, leading to the instigation of violence and the promotion of ethnic slurs through the sharing of text, images, videos, or links online. This document looks at the factors that promote fake news, hate speech, misinformation and disinformation in Nigeria. It articulates the need for a multi-dimensional approach to tackling these trends in the society.



## INTRODUCTION

In his 1972 message for World Communications Day, Pope St. Paul VI emphasized the responsibility of communicators to diligently observe facts, verify their accuracy, critically evaluate their information sources, and ultimately disseminate their findings. This guidance remains relevant in our current age, as we continue to grapple with the challenges posed by social media and the dissemination of false information.

The pervasive inadequacy of information verification has resulted in numerous individuals, regardless of their status or position, becoming victims of fake news and misinformation. Some have experienced bullying, while others have been defrauded of their hard-earned savings. For example, in February 2017, Pope Francis fell prey to fake news when an unknown source disseminated a counterfeit front cover of the Vatican's official newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, featuring fabricated interview responses from the Pope regarding the reception of Holy Communion by divorced or remarried Catholics. This incident not only tarnished his reputation but also threatened Catholic social teachings on marriage. Similarly, during the 2014 Ebola epidemic in Nigeria, misinformation led citizens to consume salt solutions and bathe with salt water, believing it to be a cure for the disease.



Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Section 39 of the Nigerian Constitution grant freedom of expression. However, this freedom does not entitle citizens to speak or publish irresponsibly. In contrast, Catholic social teachings, which underpin our perspective, emphasize the protection of human rights and the fulfilment of responsibilities. To achieve this, there is need to recognize social media as a powerful tool for evangelization and consider the Church's role in offering a Christian perspective on digital literacy<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, fake news, hate speech, and misinformation are distortions of information. They manifest in various forms, including verbal, gestural, and written, and can inflict harm on a nation in numerous ways, adversely affecting the health, education, and economy of any society.

To address these pressing concerns, The Kukah Centre's Kaduna Office, in collaboration with the HJDP, has organized a webinar focusing on mitigating the impact of misinformation, fake news, and hate speech in our society. The primary aim of the webinar is to examine and discuss the effects of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech on our society, particularly in relation to undermining Catholic social teachings. Additionally, the webinar seeks to propose solutions for managing these issues and to highlight the role of the Church's teachings in promoting responsible and accountable information sharing.

### ***THE SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES OF THE WEBINAR INCLUDE:*** \_\_\_\_\_

**Investigating the consequences of fake news, hate speech, and misinformation, specifically in terms of instigating violence, causing division, creating tension, destabilizing social order, and violating human rights within our society.**

**Reaffirming the role of Catholic social teachings in advocating for responsible citizenship and the appropriate use of social media for evangelization, rather than inciting violence.**

**Emphasizing the significance of information sharing as a crucial component of societal development and human progress.**

**Encouraging a deeper understanding of the boundaries between one's rights and the rights of others in the context of information sharing.**

<sup>1</sup> Pope Benedict XVI (2009) Message for the 43rd World Communications Day

**Analysing the current policies addressing fake news, hate speech, and misinformation, identifying their limitations and reasons for ineffectiveness.**

**Formulating policy recommendations to effectively combat fake news, hate speech, and misinformation.**

**By engaging in these discussions, the webinar aims to foster a more responsible and informed approach to information sharing, rooted in the principles of Catholic social teachings, to mitigate the detrimental effects of fake news, hate speech, and misinformation on our society.**

## ***METHODOLOGY***

The webinar was organized by the Kukah Centre's Kaduna Office on Saturday, 29th April 2023 as part of a series of projects aimed at identifying social issues affecting society on economic, political, and social levels. The purpose of the event was to examine church teachings that advocate for responsible citizenship, protection of human dignity and rights, and freedom of expression as recognized in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (as amended). It also sought to propose solutions for expressing these freedoms on social media without perpetuating fake news, hate speech, and misinformation, while educating the public on responsible and accountable information communication. To achieve this, discussants were drawn from the field of journalism, social media influencing, and the academia.

## TACKLING MISINFORMATION, FAKE NEWS AND HATE SPEECH IN THE SOCIETY

Fake news, hate speech, and misinformation affects not only one side of the country but the entire population, who are, in one way or another, victims of these pervasive societal issues in the digital age. The media is a reflection of the people, and if the challenges of fake news and hate speech are not effectively managed and prioritized by the government, Nigeria risks facing a situation akin to that of Sudan.

Incorporating social media literacy in the school curriculum was also identified as a mitigation strategy. Research has shown that raising awareness about misinformation and promoting media literacy can significantly reduce the spread of fake news (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).<sup>2</sup> In Finland, a comprehensive media literacy program was implemented in schools, and the country is consistently ranked as one of the most resistant to fake news (Martens et al., 2018).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Germany enacted the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) in 2017, which requires social media platforms to remove hate speech and misinformation within 24 hours, resulting in a decline in such content.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Vosoughi, s., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The Spread of true and False news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146 – 1151.

<sup>3</sup>Martens, B., Aguiar, L., Gomez-Herrera, E., & Mueller-Langer, F. (2018). The digital transformation of news media and the rise of disinformation and fake news. JRC Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02, Joint Research Centre.

<sup>4</sup>Schulz, W., & Paddy, L. (2019) Regulating Intermediaries to protect privacy Online – the Case of the German NetzDG. *Journal of information Technology & Politics*, 16(1), 7-23



Regarding leadership, one discussant asserted that citizens pay attention to the language employed by their leaders, thereby emphasizing the importance of language formation for those in positions of power. In conclusion, the speakers posited that the issue of social media misinformation could be primarily addressed through legislation in collaboration with major tech companies. However, the ultimate responsibility lies with the Nigerian people, who must be guided by ideas that discourage the spread of fake news and hate speech.

Existing policies to combat hate speech, misinformation, and fake news often possess penalties that can be circumvented. For instance, on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, the penalty for spreading false information or inciting hatred typically entails a “social media account block.” However, this measure proves insufficient, as perpetrators frequently create new accounts to continue their malicious activities. It is crucial to explore more effective deterrents and enforcement mechanisms to address these challenges comprehensively.

The implications of fake news in Nigeria span a multitude of social issues, encompassing electoral violence and disruptions, jungle justice, ethno-religious crises, and terrorism, among others. The following factors elucidate how fake news fuels such vices in Nigeria:

- ***Distorted Human Nature:*** The propensity to misinform, disinform, or mal-inform arises from our distorted human nature. For example, individuals driven by envy might share unverified news online to further harm the victim.
- ***Technology:*** The primary role of technology in Fake News, Hate Speech, and Misinformation is amplification. People may form assumptions based on scant or incorrect information, but these assumptions only become dangerous when shared widely. Greater accessibility to the internet has facilitated the dissemination of misinformation, enabling individuals to make life-altering decisions based on unreliable information.
- ***News Media Manipulation:*** Instances of news media manipulation, such as the Pope Francis case, have eroded the credibility of media outlets. This has driven people to rely on other, often unverifiable, sources of information that may propagate fake news and misinformation.



- **Power Dynamics:** Political motivations often drive the spread of fake news and hate speech. The desire for power can eclipse the need for coherent political campaigns, with candidates and their supporters employing hate speech against opponents.
- **Stereotypes:** Stereotyping makes it easy for people to share and amplify fake news that aligns with their preconceived notions, regardless of the story's veracity.
- **Ethnicity:** Advocates of a particular ethnic group often employ spoken words, visuals, or gestures to denigrate other ethnic groups, perpetuating hate speech and misinformation.
- **Poor Leadership:** The absence of legislative measures against hate speech and fake news has emboldened its perpetrators. If political candidates use hate speech and fake news to promote their campaigns, this behaviour may foreshadow the political climate following their election.
- **Inhumanity:** Individuals who lack compassion and sympathy may feel comfortable expressing hate speech and sharing fake news and misinformation. These actions reflect an indifference or even scorn towards the well-being of others.

**Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes education, digital literacy, and the promotion of responsible information sharing. By fostering a culture of accountability and empathy, society can work towards mitigating the harmful effects of fake news, hate speech, and misinformation.**

## STRATEGIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations target various stakeholders, including the Church, government, news media, social media platforms, civil society organizations, individuals, and educational institutions. The aim is to create a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to address these issues, fostering a culture of responsibility, accountability, and empathy in information dissemination. It is important to note that these recommendations may face several challenges, such as resistance from stakeholders, limited resources, and the evolving nature of misinformation tactics.

### *RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS:*



Religious institutions should emphasize the importance of humanism in their teachings, as this can mitigate the spread of fake news, hate speech, and misinformation.



Regular reminders of the Catholic Social Teaching, which calls for the protection of human rights and the promotion of human dignity, can help combat these issues.



Promote Respect and Dialogue on Social Media: The Church can use social media platforms to encourage respectful interactions, fostering true friendship and dialogue



### ***THE GOVERNMENT:***



The government should enact and enforce laws that hold perpetrators of fake news, hate speech, and misinformation accountable.

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Political contestants and leaders should be intentional about their language use, and educational institutions that foster responsible leadership should be supported.

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Transparent and accountable governance will encourage citizens to trust the government's efforts in addressing these issues.

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The government should actively trace and prosecute those responsible for spreading hate speech, fake news, and misinformation.

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### ***NEWS MEDIA:***



News media outlets should implement measures to deter forgery, such as including codes for content verification.

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Maintaining credibility through consistent delivery of accurate information will foster public trust and reduce reliance on unverified sources.

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### ***SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS:***



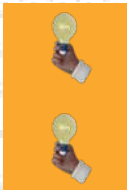
Social media platforms should re-evaluate their policies on hate speech and fake news, exploring options to demand accountability from perpetrators.

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Verification of Accounts: Social media platforms should verify accounts that consistently share credible content, distinguishing them from unreliable sources.

### **CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS (CSOS):**

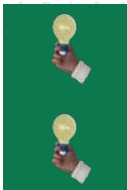


Advocacy and Public Enlightenment: Civil society organizations should host events to educate the public about the dangers of hate speech, fake news, and misinformation and how to mitigate them.

Organizations should advocate for policy implementation and track the progress of their recommendations.

### **CITIZENS:**

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Self-Regulation: Individuals should refrain from sharing unverified or inciteful information, taking responsibility for the content they disseminate.

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Practicing mindfulness when expressing opinions can help mitigate the challenge of distorted human nature.

### **EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS (PRIVATE AND PUBLIC):**

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Media literacy should be incorporated into formal education, teaching students about their rights and responsibilities concerning media content.

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Schools should establish rules that regulate students' speech and behaviour, emphasizing that hate speech, fake news, and misinformation are punishable acts.

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Educational institutions should teach students the value of asserting themselves while respecting others, fostering a culture of responsible communication.





## CONCLUSION

The protection of freedom of expression remains a delicate task, requiring careful consideration of potential consequences and unintended effects. The spread of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech on social media platforms is a pressing concern that undermines Catholic social teachings and threatens the foundations of democratic processes. Addressing this issue requires a collaborative and multifaceted approach from various stakeholders, including the Church, government, news media, social media platforms, civil society organizations, individuals, and educational institutions.

By implementing these strategic recommendations, stakeholders can work together to mitigate the detrimental effects of fake news, hate speech, and misinformation, ultimately promoting a more informed, responsible, and cohesive society.



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The Kukah Centre (TKC) is a Nigeria-based policy research institute, founded by Most Rev. Matthew Hassan Kukah, Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto. The Centre has offices in Abuja and Kaduna and treats political leadership as a collaborative exercise that requires multiple governance structures at various levels - individuals, households, small businesses, the organized private sector, NGOs and government.

Interfaith dialogue is at the core of the Centre's work and involves actively promoting conversations among Nigeria's faith communities, as well as between leaders in faith and public policy. The Kukah Centre aspires to become Nigeria's leading institution for the promotion of an active and engaged citizenry by providing support for inclusive dialogue and advocacy initiatives.

