Social media: How fake and diversionary news drowns real news

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Right from start, social media, notably, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp), have played a significant role in the spread of information beyond mainstream print and electronic media. It was obvious early that their role could be positive or negative, depending on the nature of information and its consequences for political processes.  
  
It is well known that social media are veritable platforms for sharing information, allowing citizens to voice opinions on political issues, thereby allowing voices that were previously unheard to be heard. Social media are particularly useful in increasing citizen participation in the political process, by mobilising support for political causes. In recent years, their role in organising protests for or against governments or government programmes increased after 2010, when young Arabs organised protests across the Middle East against authoritarian regimes, corruption, economic hardship, high unemployment, and limited political freedoms.  
  
Today, the use of social media for this kind of political mobilisation has been taken to the extreme in democracies, which guarantee freedoms of expression and assembly, as we saw in the United States in January 2020, when supporters of President Donald Trump attacked the Capitol (equivalent of our National Assembly) and in Brazil in January 2023, when supporters of President Jair Bolsonaro invaded the Congress and Supreme Court. Trump and Bolsonaro had led their supporters to protest the elections they lost in their respective countries. So inciting were Trump’s messages at the time that he was suspended indefinitely from using Facebook and Instagram, but his privileges were restored after two years.  
  
Since the 2023 general elections cycle in Nigeria, social media have taken a turn for the worse in the country. The escalation of their uses in spreading fake news and falsified information during the elections has hardly abated. The BBC was so perturbed by the ubiquity of disinformation during the elections that it carried out detailed investigations. The investigators discovered three websites from which a number of fake news originated and got spread on social media. They were Podium Reporters, Reportera, and Parallel Facts.  
  
What’s in vogue in Ngeria today is the use of social media to divert attention from serious issues. Two politicians in the forefront of diversionary politics are Senator Natasha Akpoti Uduaghan of the Peoples Democratic Party and Peter Obi of the Labour Party. They were both in the news recently. Senator Natasha (as she has come to be known) alleged that the Senate President had sexually assaulted her, but the Senate suspended her for six months for offenses other than sexual assault.  
  
However, all she has been talking about is the assault charge, and that’s what has been trending on social media. In the midst of the suspension and the ensuing court case, she held a big rally in her Kogi Senatorial District, using social media to draw a large crowd to the venue. To add a sensational spice, she arrived in a helicopter! It was all a ploy to attract sympathy from her political base and beyond.  
  
She again revived social media pandemonium, when she appeared at the National Assembly gates, knowing full well that she would not be allowed into the building. It was to energise debates about her course, with many media posts claiming that the Court had ordered her return to the Senate and upbraided the red chamber, when the Court did not. Rather, the Judge only expressed an opinion that the suspension for six months was excessive but conceded, under the separation of powers, that only the Senate has the power to revise its own rules and allow Natasha to represent her people.  
  
The truth is that the Judge did nor order Natasha’s return to Senate at this time. Indeed, the orders made by the Court were against Natasha for contempt, for which she was fined N5 million. While not ignoring her sexual allegation or the reasons for her suspension, it is obvious that all the helicopter appearance in her Senatorial District and the march on the gate of the National Assembly were political theatre to feed social media platforms.  
  
Peter Obi’s case is different. Like Natasha, he went to Edo state to raise his supporters’ political consciousness and create social media content for them. Hence the large crowd of supporters that received and escorted him to St Philomena Nursing School, where he donated N15 million. Within minutes, it was all over social media, with some claiming he donated N50 million, while others claimed he made the donation to his alma mater. The truth is that, from the content of his speech at the event, Obi went to Edo to campaign for support.  
  
In no time, however, Obi’s visit, for whatever it was worth, was drowned out by what the Governor of Edo state, Monday Okpebholo, said of the visit. The Governor had cautioned Obi never to visit the state without alerting state authorities so that adequate arrangements could be made for his protection. But the way he couched the message made it sound like a threat. That was the dominant reading on social media and even on TV shows.  
  
Two interesting social media diversions from substantive issues were the gaffes by the Senate President and Governor Hope Uzodima, in which they swapped the name of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu for the late President Muhammadu Buhari, while talking about Buhari’s death and praising Tinubu for according Buhari a superb state burial. Social media went to town with the gaffes so much so that their contexts were lost and forgotten. Several readings of the gaffes are possible. One, it was possible that Tinubu was so much on the speakers’ mind that his name was the first on their lips when they wanted to talk about a President. Two, those who wished Tinubu dead found the gaffe interesting, while those who support his work found the gaffe unwarranted from top government officials. All readings and interpretations were content for social media.  
  
A few days later, a Tiktoker claimed falsely that President Tinubu had seriously fallen ill from poisoning. Some claimed that the Tiktoker said the President collapsed and died, a typical amplification of falsehood. The Tiktoker was promptly arrested, but death did not appear anywhere in the court charges.  
  
Perhaps the greatest recent social media diversion was the viral video of Vice President Kashim Shettima opening the car door for his Brazilian counterpart, Geraldo Alckmin, as the latter left the Presidential Villa. Yet, what had happened earlier between both men was of major consequence for both nations. They signed several MOUs, covering defense, energy, culture, drug control, and food security, featuring a $1 billion Green Imperative agricultural Initiative. Social media would have none of that.  
  
Rather, Shettima’s courteous act of opening the car door for his guest was turned into something else: Some claimed that “The dude has serious low self-esteem and inferiority complex.” Another concluded that “After they approved their loans they act humble”! Although there were a few posts that defended Shettima’s action as mere diplomatic courtesy, the vast majority blamed him. None, however, mentioned the substantive trade agreements between the two nations.  
  
2027 may look far on the calendar. It is already in the horizon for social media activists. The government should begin to prepare for what is coming.