

## Assessment of the Role of Social-Media and Information Warfare in the Public Spread of Insecurity Narratives in Nigeria

**Ali Yakubu**

Department of Public Administration, Federal Polytechnic Idah, Nigeria  
Email: talk2bogger2000@yahoo.com

**Bello Ayuba**

Department of Computer Science, Federal Polytechnic Idah, Nigeria  
Email: ay.com2k14@gmail.com

### **Abstract**

*The paper explores the multifaceted role of the social media in creating and spreading insecurity stories in the already compromised information environment in Nigeria. It identifies the narratives of terrorism, banditry, kidnapping for ransom and communal violence by a thematic examination of the semi-structured interviews with 20 respondents across different geopolitical zones, examining their encounters, interpretations and transmissions of such narratives. The discussion shows that social media is a two-sided phenomenon: it is a highly critical (but commonly sensationalist) alternative source of news where state communication is lost or distrusted and at the same time, a scene of information warfare where actors use platform affordances to pursue polarized agendas. The enquiry is anchored on two theoretical frameworks, which are Framing Theory and ideas of institutional weakness. The results show that viewers have high-order but haphazard verification behaviour in a curated environment of emotivity, algorithmic preference of confrontation and isolated close-group rumour mills. The research reports a research gap, which is critical to fill in the previous knowledge of the localized, agentic reactions of the Nigerian social media users towards the security-related disinformation. It concludes that spreading insecurity discourses is not a matter of technology but rather a manifestation of deep institutional crises, such as a shortage of official credibility and a failure to communicate strategically. This paper suggests the use of a multi-stakeholder strategy that focuses on improving the public media literacy, introducing responsible platform regulation and most importantly, restoring the state legitimacy through transparency and efficient security delivery.*

**Keywords:** Social-Media, Insecurity, Disinformation, Information Warfare.

### **Introduction**

Nigeria is struggling with a complex security crisis that include Boko Haram /ISWAP insurgency in the Northeast, banditry and kidnapping in the Northwest, separatist movements in the southeast with the Middle Belt farmer-herder conflicts (Sarki, 2026). This physical violence is symbiotic with a coexistent war of discourses, which confronts major battlefields in digital arenas. These crises are understood, sensationalized and even weaponized in the social media platforms (Quadri, 2026). Jihadist expansion, criminal banditry, state-sponsored persecution or governance failure are competing someone for dominance in Nigeria (International Institute for Religious Freedom, 2026).

The state of Nigeria, which is marked by the poor institutional capacity and a high level of trust deficit, finds it difficult to regulate this narrative space. Formal messages are seldom timely, contradictory or received with the extreme skepticism of the public and it leaves a void that is easily consumed by viral and emotional content (Sarki, 2026). This space is also weaponized by the local insurgency factions, which operate on propaganda to spread fear and project mightiness, as well as a variety of political and non-state actors that unleash information warfare to achieve diverse purposes. Even worse, there seem to be no strategic state reaction to this informational chaos; as an example, the Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, although aware of this danger, did not assign any particular budget to counter the misinformation of the population, in its 2026 plans (Akewushola, 2026).

In this regard, the research questions of the current study are as follows: How do users of Nigerian social media find and respond to stories about insecurity? What are the thematic patterns of these stories and how they were perceived by the population? What are the platform affordances (e.g., encryption, algorithms, visual media) that are involved in the dissemination and effect of these stories? And, how are the expansion of such digital storytelling connected with the felt weakness of state institutions? The paper applies a qualitative, thematic framework of semi-structured interviews to address these questions, believing that social media is a symptom and an accelerant to security dilemmas in Nigeria and creates an impression on the people that is difficult to overcome and widens the rifts in the society.

## **Literature Review**

Recent studies on the topic of social media and conflict in Nigeria can be organized into three overlapping lines of investigation namely the platformisation of insurgent propaganda, the weaponization of political disinformation (specifically by artificial intelligence) and the association between social media use, social perception and social capital. Although current literature has developed some necessary foundations, the pace of acceleration of digital threats in 2025-2026 necessitates the incorporation of new data. To this broadened review of existing literature, recent proven studies and data on fact-checking are included to update each thematic section and conclude with the recognition of gaps in the existing knowledge that are essential and can be filled in this paper.

The initial research recorded the use of graphic videos by Boko Haram and the Islamic State West of Africa Province (ISWAP) to instill fear and create a sense of power. Barnett and Musa (2026, quoted in the International Institute of Rapid Fact-Checking, IIRF) proved that these groups aim to gain terrain in the regions of moderate insecurity and complement their spatial aspirations with online propaganda. New studies contribute largely to this image. According to the analysis of the Jamestown Foundation of October 2025, the Nigerian militants have also entered a new stage of digital warfare, which implies the systematic use of encrypted messaging apps (Telegram, WhatsApp) and algorithmic amplification on traditional channels. ISWAP has now developed professionalized media units: raw footage of the north-eastern part of the country is sent to handlers of the Islamic State outside the country, repackaged with high-production values and sent through private Telegram channels like “Nashir News Agency” hours after the operations.

Platform vernaculars have been modified to suit militants. As one of the most popular social media apps (with a following of about 24 million in Nigeria alone, and 1 billion globally) in 2024, TikTok has turned out to be a prominent frontier. Hausa language songs, dance trends and memes featuring

extremist content are distributed through the Hausa language, invading algorithmic suggestions feeds reaching northern youth in large quantities. The bandit groups in the northwest also plan ransom on TikTok, which normalizes violence with the everyday consumption of content. This change of the fixed propaganda videos is an indicator of a transition into the autonomous spheres of war with its own time and space logic. Analysts warning: House of telegrams (Hausa) or TikTok accounts that post extremist material under the anonymous name Hausa nowadays are used as early-warning signals before violence strikes the real world. Nigerian political disinformation literature has left the lie of an election cycle decisively. Quadri (2026) notes that misinformation is a type of long-term narrative construction, which erodes institutional trust, not just episodic pre-poll manipulation, but this statement is supported by numerous sources in 2025-2026. The forecast of fact-checking provided by the International Centre of Information Research (ICIR) in 2026 confirms that political actors take months to systematically doubt the electoral institutions, voter registers and judicial outcomes, which subsequently make it difficult for fact-checks to happen after.

The artificial intelligence aspect has become a reality in a disturbingly specific way. An example of a locally-specific synthetic content is a May 2025 deep-fake video of Peter Obi speaking to the leader of Burkina Faso and circulated widely before being debunked. An expository written by 'Factcheck Africa' in February 2026 explains that artificial intelligence (AI) generated images purporting to depict Nigerian politicians supporting their opponents now play into the familiarity one might have in how campaigns are represented in visual form; the images avoid most detection software since they are not entirely fake, but modified. What has become known as the dividend of the liar has been the authenticity of the audio recordings of politicians who utter controversial statements, which are not considered as true anymore but as being AI-generated; the opposite is also true of AI-generated clips that are consistent with the current ideology and thus believed to be authentic. Such undermining of audiovisual confidence is a qualitative change in the environment that was initially described by Quadri (2026).

The issue of ciphertext-based applications that Quadri (2026) raises is still urgent. New data attest to WhatsApp and Telegram as the main sources of political misinformation, messages served as an insider information are exchanged in closed groups where fact-checkers cannot access it. Nonetheless, the ecosystem has been diversified: the January 2026 circulation of an alleged Boko Haram-ISWAP convoy through a military checkpoint (only to be disclosed as Nollywood behind-the-scene footage), gathers 4,000 shares on X in alone. This implies that the disinformation research agenda should go beyond elite control of politics to include decentralized opportunistic misinformation that accumulate into systemic diminishing trust.

A study of the social media adoption by the youth in Nigeria indicates their continued ambivalence. Ezeaka, Umuzue, Chukwuma & Obiesili (2025) developed the idea that Facebook enables overcoming the social capital and civic mobilization, whereas Instagram and TikTok enhance bonding relationships. Nevertheless, this interdependence is facilitated by the knowledge of misinformation and information overload among participants. The 2025 analysis of Lindaikajiblog and Instablog9ja by Obiora, Agbachukwu, & Adikuru (2025) gives finer details: both blogs have similar stories about insecurity happenings, but their styles are so different. The framing used by Lindaikajiblog is traditional and neutral; Instablog9ja uses flowering and sensationalized presentations that do not contribute to social stability. These results operationalize the tension of engagement incentives over responsible reporting identified in Obiora *et al.* (2025).

There are counter-narratives brought about by new evidence. Jahani, Kolic, Tonneau, Lin, Barkoczi & Fraiberger (2026) provide the first large-scale randomized controlled trial of hate speech prevention, which was implemented on X (previously Twitter) in Nigeria. The campaign that showed 73,136 users (who previously were active in ethnic hate speech) prosocial video messages of Nigerian celebrities cut hate speech by 2.5-5.5% during a 20-week campaign, with about 75% lasting four months. Targeting a greater portion of the audience of a particular user minimized by more than 50% hate reposts on the most exposed accounts. This shows that the conflict-amplifying nature of social media is not deterministic and scalable, culturally tuned interventions can reduce the bad behaviour. It implies that the social capital literature should include experimental interventions research, as well as studies based on observation.

The three-and-a-half-year intervention (2022-2025) of the North East Youth Initiative for Development, which also trained 84 youth social media influencers to combat violent extremism discourse online and encouraged peace in the region through livelihood support to more than 120 youth and women. Although it is not a controlled trial, the present community-based programme shows an up-coming civil society capacity to operationalize the bridging social capital as defined by Ezeaka *et al.* (2025)

Nevertheless, Sarki (2026) in *Vanguard* summarizes a long-standing theoretical lacuna. His argument is that the danger social media presents to Nigeria is not in the very evil nature of the platforms but rather in the relationship between a weak and fragile system of digital ecosystem and a fragmented, distrustful system of governance. In times of crisis, the state reacts slowly, incompetently or inconsistently; silence and inconsistency leave gaps that are filled by misinformation. This disintegration of the status of narrative cannot be discussed outside of the greater crisis of institutional legitimacy in Nigeria; the decades of unmet promises, questionable elections and the sense of injustice have created a citizenry that is highly skeptical of the voices of authority.

This is the gap that is critical and is addressed in this paper. Although numerous researchers refer to institutional weakness, not many of them theorize the nexus between the decline in the credibility of the institutions in question and the rise of the social media discourse as the new authority framework. The current literature reports misinformation rates and dynamics of online platforms but over-generalizes regarding how the experience of institutional failure accumulated by the citizens predisposes them to believing unverified information found online. Using the Framing Theory and institutional analysis operationalized by using original interview data on the daily processing of users of insecurity-related information in Nigeria, this paper will discuss the interaction of perceived illegitimacy of the official channel of information and the perceived authenticity of peer-shared information. This work sheds light on the micro-based issues of macro-level fragility that Sarki discussed by focusing on the user perceptions and interpretive practices.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

There are two theoretical frameworks that guide this study.

**Framing Theory:** Framing Theory is based on the concept of communication and sociology, according to which a presentation of information, the frame, actively influences the way information is perceived, interpreted and given meaning to by the audience (Entman, 1993). There is a process of frames choosing certain features of an observed reality and increasing their salience,

thus facilitating a certain definition of a problem, a causal attribution, moral judgement, and/or treatment prescription. The Nigerian situation defines insecurity incidents in competing geopolitical terms, including: religious persecution of Christians, jihadist expansion, criminal banditry or a crisis of governance and economic failure (IIRF, 2026). This makes social media, with its visual media affordance, hashtag activism and algorithmic personalization, like a potent framing machine, increasing the prominence of some frames and decreasing the strength of others. The current research addresses the issue of what frames dominate the social-media conversation as seen through the prism of the user and the impact that these frames have on the interpretation of insecurity by users.

**Institutional Weakness and the Narrative Vacuum:** This theory is based on political science and sociology to the argument that the spread of contentious narratives is a direct result of institutional failure. A narcissist vacuum is created when the legitimacy of formal institutions like the government, security agencies, and traditional media, when they lack credibility and effective communication ability (Sarki, 2026). A state, which adheres to crises with silence, contradictions, and defensive denials loses the position of the main determiner of reality (Sarki, 2026). This vacuum is easily filled by other narrative entrepreneurs in social media. The less institutional power and communicative capability the state is the more power it gives up to the digital platforms, and the more radical or polarized the narratives that thrive. This theory is not limited to technological determinism to base the information disorder in the political and institutional environment of the Nigerian state.

## **Methodology**

This study used qualitative research design, and semi-structured interviews served as the main data-gathering instrument to obtain detailed accounts on the experiences and perceptions of the participants on the issue of insecurity in Nigeria. Purposive sampling strategy was used to sample twenty respondents who would represent the six geopolitical zones of the nation thus making it diverse in the areas of age, gender, occupation, and urban/rural locality. The inclusion criteria required that the participants should be habitual users of social media (use it every day) and must have engaged in or posted content related to insecurity in the Nigerian context.

The data was collected during four weeks using the secure online video and audio resources. Interviews were performed in 45-60 minutes and were based on a semi-structured protocol that inquired: the main social media used to take in news; impressions of content related to insecurity; ways of confirming information; emotional and cognitive reactions; impressions of government and media trustworthiness. All the interviews were taped, transcribed word-to-word and later anonymized to maintain the participant confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was undertaken based on six phases of the framework as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps of the analytic procedure included familiarization with the transcripts, the creation of initial codes, theme searching, theme reviewing, theme definition and naming, as well as the creation of a thorough report. The coding processes were done in NVivo software in order to organize and manage the data systematically. Themes were identified inductively based on the data itself, thus making sure that the outcomes of the resulting analyses would be based on the voices and concerns of the participants.

**Table 1: Participant Demographics (N=20)**

<b>Demographic Variable</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>Number</b>
<b>Geopolitical Zone</b>	North West	4
	North East	3
	North Central	3
	South West	4
	South East	3
	South-South	3
<b>Age</b>	18-25	7
	26-40	9
	41-60	4
<b>Gender</b>	Male	11
	Female	9
<b>Primary Platform for News</b>	X (Twitter)	8
	Facebook	6
	WhatsApp/Telegram	4
	Instagram	2

### **Findings and Thematic Analysis**

Qualitative analysis of the interview data revealed that there are four key themes that explain the connection between social media and the narratives of insecurity in Nigeria.

#### **Social Media as the Main and Problematic Information Space**

The interview information narrowed down to the claim that social media networks have replaced traditional media as the main channel through which the emergent security incidents can be reported. Respondents singled out speedier spreading, immediate availability, and the sense of genuineness of raw, unedited information as some of the factors that underlie this change. A respondent in Lagos said he had seen a video on Twitter showing a situation somewhere in Sokoto or Benue even before the reputable broadcasting houses like Channels or NTA confirmed the reports. However, the dependence created a lot of anxiety at the same time. Respondents described the information flow as chaotic, psychologically exhausting and full of unproven assertions. The prolific and iconic quality of material, especially the raw footage of attacks and kidnappings, was often given as a cause of general anxiety and a feeling of being threatened on a larger scale.

#### **The Framing Contest: Grievance, Polarization and Sensationalism**

It was shown during the interviews that the participants can identify the competing narratives prevailing in the academic literature. The respondents were able to distinguish between the accounts where violence is depicted as religious, ethnic, or strictly criminal. Nevertheless, they contended that the stories most regularly disseminated via social-media are likely to increase complaints and polarization. The posts with most engagement, in the number of likes, shares, and comments, usually either project ethnic or religious victimhood ahead of time or contrast state incompetence with rebel ability. One of the Abuja respondents has noted that posts by viruses are seldom analytical: they are characterized by emotive language like “look what they are doing to us

again”, or derogatory statements about the performance of a military roadblock in comparison with a well-trained terrorist blockade. Trending blogs were also denounced by the respondents as sensationalist. Another interviewee added that sensational stories are purposefully created to achieve clicks and not informative, which is confirmed by such headlines as Bloodbath in Plateau, or Terrorists on Rampage, which is created in a way that makes people panic and confirms them that no place is safe.

### **Verification of a Low-Trust Ecosystem**

The respondents, in contrast to the presumption that the masses are generally gullible, also had heterogeneous but active verification behaviours, which supported the literature on Nigerian students analyzing AI content (Sunday & Nwagbara, 2026). The most commonly used methods included checking that there are several sources, mainly corroboration of the already existing traditional media outlets, evaluation of the quality of videos and photographs to determine whether they are manipulated or not, and checking the credibility of the person who created the content. As one of the respondents of Kano described, “I investigate the profile of the poster; in case they simply spread inappropriate information about another tribe or religion, I do not pay attention to it”. However, the vigilance that was persistent was recognized as fatiguing. The major obstacle to be trusted was not necessarily the content, but rather the perceived inadequacy of official sources of authority. The respondents said that although the government made announcements, they still doubted and thought that the announcements were way of damage control and not an expression of the truth. This informational distrust of institutions forms the basis of the current information environment.

### **Weaponization of Fear and Closed Networks**

Though social media is viewed as a channel of fast conversation, users realized that encrypted communication tools like WhatsApp can be effective medium of rumours and panic. A respondent of Enugu explained that these closed networks are the major channels through which true panic is spreading. A voice message circulated in intra-family and community networks, saying that there were kidnappers in the neighbouring village, or that an unannounced curfew had been established, quickly spread because the person making the voice note is credible. As a result, when such messages reach the individuals, people tend to act as soon as they receive them. Those closed networks give rise to something of a peer-to-peer information warfare, which localizes terror narratives and often leads to preemptive responses, like market shutdowns or flight cancellations, which increase the social and economic impacts of insecurity outside the immediate geographical scales of action.

**Table 2: Thematic Analysis of Interview Data**

Theme	Key Characteristics	Illustrative Participant Quote
<b>Primary, Problematic Information Arena</b>	Speed over accuracy; access to raw content; emotional overwhelm and anxiety.	"It's my go-to for news, but it's also where my anxiety comes from. The videos are too much sometimes."
<b>Framing Contest</b>	Dominance of grievance/polarization frames; algorithmic amplification of conflict; sensationalism from key influencers.	"The algorithm shows you more of what angers you. If you react to a post about herdsmen, your whole feed becomes a war zone."
<b>Agentic but Exhausted Verification</b>	Multi-source checking, profile scrutiny, media literacy; undermined by pervasive institutional distrust.	"We have become our own fact-checkers because we trust no one else—not the government, not even some news stations anymore."
<b>Weaponization in Closed Networks</b>	WhatsApp/Telegram as rumor mills; peer-to-peer propagation of unverified alerts; tangible social and economic impacts.	"A single voice note on WhatsApp can empty a whole market. The fear it spreads is sometimes worse than the actual attack somewhere else."

## Discussions

The current findings are an ideal representation of the theoretical frameworks that inform the investigation and highlight the urgency of the information crisis in Nigeria. The Framing Theory explains how the technical and social designs of social media platforms shape the insecurity discourses that are ascribed prominence. Engagement metrics inherently favour frames that are easy to understand, are emotionally charged, and identity-based e.g., religious persecution or ethnic cleansing more than the more complex, structural explanations e.g., governance failure or economic inequality (IIRF, 2026; Sarki, 2026). This results in the polarization of the discourse among the population and makes it less conducive to subtle policy solutions than the offline reality might deserve. The sensationalism of popular blogs (Obiora *et al.* 2024) is not an accident but a logical solution to a system that is based on engagement.

More importantly, the institutional weakness thesis is supported by the findings. The advanced, but weak verification procedures embraced by users are a direct response to two distinct failures: the inability of the state to guarantee physical security and the inability to deliver credible information and information in a good time on the part of its organs of communication. The absence of narrative in the state as reported by Sarki (2026) can be felt in the data of the interviews. An official statement which is disbelieved without any thought with the default mechanism, and the government never makes strategic resources spending on information countermeasures (Akwushola, 2026), it gives up the informational turf. The social media does not insecure the situation, but it mirrors and replicates the perceived experience of institutional failure and panic by the population. WhatsApp group weaponization of fear is a response on a grassroots level to this vacuum, where citizens, having no trustworthy guidance provided by the authorities, resort to, and share informal, and largely false risk assessment.

This work fills one of the major research gaps as it foreshadows the agentic but limited role of the audience. Although earlier literature has focused on producer-side measures (e.g., insurgent propaganda, political disinformation), as the present study shows, the Nigerian users are not passive consumers. They act as critical (though overwhelmed) navigators that apply localized literacies in

order to assess information. This concurs with the research that revealed that the Nigerian young population evaluates advertisements prepared by AI critically (Sunday & Nwagbara, 2026). However, this agency is constrained: it is only active on an individual scale and not on a collective one and it is constantly undercut by the overwhelming disinformation and the distrust against alternative information sources, which is deeply rooted.

The results also help in explaining the interests of various participants in this informational warfare. In the case of insurgents and violent actors it is psychological terror and the undermining of legitimacy. In the case of political actors, it can be refining constituencies or disqualifying opponents. The acquisition of traffic and engagement is the main goal of popular bloggers and influencers, which accidentally makes them the agents of sensationalism. To the average user the end-game is existential; they have to identify actual danger in such a tempestuous situation so that they may safeguard themselves and their groups. Such competing goals create an information ecosystem that is adversarial and destabilizing in nature.

**Table 3: Content Analysis Frame of Major Nigerian Social Media Blogs on Insecurity (Illustrative)**

<b>Blog/Platform</b>	<b>Typical Frame</b>	<b>Language/Tone</b>	<b>Primary Engagement Driver</b>	<b>Perceived Impact (From Interviews)</b>
<b>Instablog9ja</b>	Sensationalist/Alert	Hyperbolic, urgent, emotive	Fear, urgency, curiosity	Rapid spread of information, but often escalates public panic.
<b>Lindaikejiblog</b>	Conventional/Neutral-Slant	More formal, descriptive, less emotive	Credibility, comprehensiveness	Seen as relatively more reliable, but still prone to speed errors.
<b>X (Twitter)</b>	Polarized/Debate	Argumentative, sarcastic, activist	Outrage, tribal/religious affinity	Creates polarized echo chambers; drives national debate narratives.
<b>WhatsApp Groups</b>	Rumor/Community Alert	Informal, personal, testimonial	Trust in sender, communal solidarity	Causes immediate behavioral changes (e.g., market closures, flight).

## **Conclusion**

This paper concludes that the effect of social media in the spread of insecurity stories in Nigeria is not a leading causal agent but a powerful precipitant in an already cooked milieu where actual violence, institutional inefficiencies, and deep-rooted distrust in the government are real. Thematic analysis demonstrates that Nigerian users are digitally skilled but informationally fatigued subjectively, having to make their way through a disorganized information ecology where engagement-driven algorithms prefer emotive, polarizing frames to structural explanations. The

agentic verification behaviours, including cross-checking the sources, scrutinizing the profiles, evaluating the authenticity of the media, etc. are demonstrated by the end users, but it is an individualized and unsustainable effort, constantly undercut by the sheer scale of the disinformation and perceived illegitimacy of the official communications.

More importantly, the results confirm that the social media does not produce the narratives of insecurity in a vacuum. Instead, these platforms expose and amplify a more underlying institutional crisis: the failure of the state to provide physical security or provision of credible and timely information. As a result, the narrative vacuum is inevitably occupied by sensationalist content producers, rebel propagandists, and rumour mills of fear of the unknown, encrypted peer networks. Nigerian information warfare is not as much a technological issue as it is a political one, a byproduct of undermined legitimacy and the lack of strategic message.

The solution to this crisis cannot be limited to the platform regulation and fact-checking. It requires the core rebuilding of credibility by the states on the grounds of clear governance, efficient security provision, and investment of strategic communication as a national vital operation. Until Nigerian institutions regain their narrative power, the social media will remain the overarching, disruptive storyteller of the security narrative in the country.

### **Recommendations**

To mitigate this crisis, the following recommendations were proffered from various perspectives:

1. **For the Nigerian State:** The most critical intervention must be to address the root cause: the deficit of legitimacy and effectiveness. This involves not only improving security provision but also revolutionizing strategic communication. Proactive, transparent and consistent official messaging is required to fill the narrative vacuum. The government must treat strategic communication as a critical security sector, deserving of budget and expertise.
2. **For Civil Society and Media:** There is a need to scale up media and information literacy (MIL) programs that go beyond fact-checking to teach critical frame analysis, helping citizens deconstruct *why* a story is told a certain way. Supporting investigative journalism that provides the depth missing from social media snippets is crucial.
3. **For Technology Platforms:** Global platforms must invest in more sophisticated, locally informed content moderation for the Nigerian context, especially in major local languages. They should also alter algorithms in crisis situations to deprioritize sensationalist content and promote authoritative sources.
4. **For Communities:** Leveraging the same closed networks that spread rumors for good by creating verified community alert systems in partnership with local leaders and security agencies as this could help reclaim these spaces.

Ultimately, winning the war against insecurity narratives requires first winning the peace of public trust. Until the Nigerian state and other institutions can reclaim their credibility, social media will remain the dominant and deeply problematic narrator of the nation's security story.

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