

Chapter 27

“Type Amen” or Perish! Religious Deception on Facebook

Lily Chimuanya
Covenant University, Nigeria

Ebuka Igwebuike
Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines religious discourse on Facebook and brings to the fore the recurrent deceptive requests that have given rise to new forms of religious extremism and radicalism. Many Christians have turned to social media as a medium where their faith can be practiced and with the intention of enforcing it on others. One major avenue through which this ensues is in the inherent ideological requests on Facebook where members are threatened to either type “Amen” or be afflicted with curses as punishment. These misleading requests usually attract instantaneous thousands of “likes” and consenting responses that depict underlying fear. An awareness of these extremist inclinations against the backdrop of religion is crucial to the understanding and interpretation of the semiotic realities within such Facebook posts.

INTRODUCTION

The present information age is marked by the urge for people to share their beliefs and world views with others especially in limitless and porous spaces as provided by the Internet (Hjarvard, 2011); in turn, the internet has been saturated with propagation of beliefs that are not completely true, leading up to the dissemination of deceptive information. For instance, Mejias and Vokuev (2017) observe that in state politics citizens are active participants in their own disenfranchisement by using the social media to generate, consume or distribute false information, thereby legitimizing disinformation. Deceptive information in this study refers to all forms of disinformation and misinformation that are geared towards dissimulation, propaganda or distraction. Religion is one of the social domains that has suffered major hit by this flawed information trend (Campbell, 2013). Being the “opium of the people” as observed by Karl Marx¹, religion affords people the opportunity to freely and persuasively propagate both shared and individual beliefs on the efficacy of the supernatural, however, this freedom sometimes metamorphose

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into the use of subtle verbal or written ideologically saturated threat, patterned after specific religious dogma, to enforce ones view on others without recourse to facts. According to Kumar and Geethakumari (2014), the birth of social networks has made every user a self-publisher with no editing, checking for factual accuracy and clearly with no accountability. They are also of the opinion that the truthfulness of a post is certified once such post is seen by millions of users on their computer screen. Agreeably, it must be acknowledge at this earliest point that many propagators of deceptive religious information on the internet do not often see any harm in their practice, rather they perceive it as a way of evangelising their doctrines.

Consequently, with the extension of religious practices to an online platform, many have turned to the social media as a medium where their faith can be practised and enforced on others. One major avenue through which this forced participation ensues is in the inherent ideological requests on Facebook where members are threatened to either type ‘Amen’ or be afflicted with curses as punishment. These persuasive requests usually attract thousands of ‘likes’ and responses such that one wonders at the motives behinds the posts and responses and on whose authority are such posts endorsed (*see Caspi & Gorsky, 2006*).

The study examines an emerging ideological threat on Facebook in order to bring to fore the subtle deceptive acts that are embedded in them. The deception in them are presented as graphic posts with various afflicted individuals, objects and renowned personalities, requesting readers to “‘type amen”’ or be afflicted or even “‘perish”’. To achieve this objective, the study will answer the following questions:

1. What are the semiotic patterns used in ‘Type Amen’ texts on Facebook?
2. How do such semiotic pattern express deceptive persuasion?

BACKGROUND: DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a computer and Internet-based technology that expedites the sharing of information, ideas and thoughts through the building of virtual networks and communities. It enables people to quickly share contents such as videos, photos, documents and other personal information via their computer, tablet or smartphone (Newman, 2011). The social media was created as a fast and easier way to find, connect and interact with family and friends. It has also been embraced by businesses as a faster way to reach customers (Qualman, 2010). Global Digital Statshot Q3 2017 puts the number of active social media users at over 3 billion, with over 90% of users being young people between the ages of 18 and 29 (Pew Research Centre, 2016).

Table 1 shows the top ten popular social media networks worldwide and ranked by the number of active accounts as at January, 2019. Facebook which is the first to hit 1 billion active subscribers maintains its position as the leading social media network. Facebook was created by Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard University and launched as FaceMash in July 2003 but later became TheFacebook on Febuary 4, 2004. Although access to the website was initially limited to the United States and Canada, by September 2006, everyone with a valid email address and 13 years and above was allowed to join the Facebook community (Ellison, *et al.* 2007).

While social media has many advantages, especially in terms of making business connections easier and faster, a lot of disadvantages still trail its use; one of which is social media being a conduit for dis-

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